

Session 4

March 22, 2020

Unit 1: Jesus Is . . .

The Humble Servant

Jesus is our model of humble service to others.

The Word

John 13:1-17

Session Outcome

To explore what it means to follow Jesus' example of servanthood.

Discover:

Illustrated Bible Life explains why hospitality was an important part of the ancient world, and provides verse-by-verse commentary on the Scripture passage.

Last Week:

We saw that Jesus, the Great Teacher, is the ultimate voice we must listen to, learn from, and follow.

This Week:

We will see how Jesus is the ultimate example of servanthood.

Listen:

This week's Illustrated Bible Life podcast on FoundryLeader.com looks at the importance of hospitality in the ancient Near East.

Discover:

It was very important to the people of the ancient Near East to welcome travelers into their homes and offer shelter and nourishment, while protecting them from possible dangers. The

ancients believed that hosts were a blessing to the guests as much as they were receivers of blessings from their guests. This week's Illustrated Bible Life article, "Hospitality in the Biblical World," explains why hospitality was such a significant part of the ancient world.

Engage the Word

The Context of the Foot Washing John 13:1-5

As is usual, John's gospel has packed a surplus of meaning into a few words. By telling us the event took place "just before the Passover festival," John connects the foot washing and the approaching death of Jesus with the Old Testament account of the Exodus from Egypt and the pivotal, tenth plague that convinced the Pharaoh to let Israel go free. Deliverance—whether from sin or from an evil empire—does not depend on power and military might when God is involved. Rather, humble obedience in service to God opens the way to freedom.

Washing the feet of guests was common courtesy in the ancient Near East (and most cultures today where sandals are the typical footwear and walking is the typical mode of transportation). Dusty roads littered with garbage, refuse, and manure inevitably caused feet clad in sandals to become dirty, uncomfortable, unhealthy, and stinky. Every household had a person assigned to wash the feet of guests and there was nothing pleasant about that task. By virtue of that assignment, the foot washer had the lowest status of anyone in the household.

The key to the foot washing done by Jesus comes in the words of verse 1, "Having loved his own . . . he loved them to the end." Washing the disciples' feet would have been regarded as humiliating. The removal of one's outer clothing was considered shameful in the culture of Jesus' time. Some scholars suggest that stripping himself to wash the disciples' feet symbolized the shame Jesus would bear on the cross just days later. How was He able to humble himself in this way? Love. Love led Him to wash the disciples' feet. Love led Him to the cross to die for us.

The Conflict in Having One's Feet Washed John 13:6-11

The conversation between Jesus and Peter recorded in John 13:6-10 is puzzling at several levels, but two things are very clear. First, Peter does not understand what Jesus is doing. He seemed to think that the primary point was the power of water to clean his feet and all the rest of his body. Clean feet for the disciples was one of Jesus' goals, but it was not primary. Peter's failure to understand was ultimately a failure to understand love and being loved.

Second, Jesus clearly connected washing Peter's feet with a "part with" Him. Peter understood that Jesus was the last person in the room who "should have" been washing the group's feet. That Jesus had undertaken this task shamed Peter. He was not ashamed enough to offer to take over the foot washing task, but culturally he knew that Jesus was humiliating himself by washing

the disciples' feet. Naturally he resisted that humiliation of Jesus because he did not understand the fellowship of suffering that comes to those who humbly serve. Many today fail to have a "part with" Jesus because they will not submit to humble service.

The state of Peter's heart is not clear to us. It seems likely that it was pride that caused him to push aside Jesus' act of service. However, other explanations are possible. Shame and cultural blindness may have also figured in Peter's conflicted response to Jesus.

Jesus' Conclusion to the Foot Washing John 13:12-17

There are times when actions need no explanation to make their point. But usually actions need explanations if we are to understand the teaching purpose of those actions. Jesus knew that the disciples could have drawn several differing conclusions from His action of washing their feet. He specifically wanted them to understand that His washing of their feet was an example for them to follow. He also wanted them to know that earthly status must never impede His followers from humble service.

Christlikeness is not simply a matter of an attitude. Followers of Jesus must do as He has done. Unfortunately, it is possible to participate in a service of foot washing and never love as Jesus loved when He washed the disciples' feet. It is possible never to translate the humble service of foot washing in ancient culture into acts of humble service in our culture. But doing acts of humble service are necessary if we are to be blessed.

The titles Jesus used of himself in John 13:13, "teacher" and "Lord," were strategically selected. They represent the most honored titles attributed to Jesus in Jewish culture. His point is that there is no position of leadership, no honored status in the community of Jesus, that exempts His followers from acts of humble service. Acts of humble service reveal the DNA of Christlikeness in a person.

The expectation of humble service is one of the most difficult expectations of Jesus that we encounter. Like Peter, we are conflicted by our desire to control the Lord and bend His will to benefit us, but if we want to participate in His community and in His life we must learn this lesson.

Did You Know?

The Greek word translated "end" in verse 1 can mean the end of a time period. It can mean "completely," or it can mean the accomplishment of a goal.

Think About It

Foot washing is not an act of humble service in cultures where shoes and stockings are the normal footwear and people seldom walk in dirt. What are actions in our culture that are acts of humble service?

Reflect

In what ways can you wash the feet of others this week?

Roger Hahn

Discussion Guide

Insight

Jesus embodied the characteristics of the Suffering Servant, the humble Son, and the Messianic King. The account of Him washing the disciples' feet illustrate His identity in these respects (Philippians 2:3-7).

Connect to My Experience

Share with the group this illustration from the writer: When I was a teenager, there was one particular Sunday when our church's youth pastor preached the Sunday morning sermon. I remember very little about the content of the actual message, but I do recall distinctly how he brought the sermon to a close. As our youth pastor made his way out of the pulpit down to the floor, he invited the congregation to come to the altar and "humiliate yourselves before the Lord." Although he meant to say "humble yourselves," the intent of his invitation was clear to us—the proper posture before the Lord is one of humility.

Where do we see examples of humility in our culture today?

Where do we see examples of humility in the church today?

What would be the opposite of humility? In what ways do we see humility's opposite prevalent in our culture?

Transition:

In our session today, we will discover that Jesus calls us away from those positions of power esteemed by our culture and calls us toward a posture of humility expressed in love.

Connect to the Word

Invite a group member to read John 13:1-5, then discuss the following,

When reading the Bible, it's always a good practice to ask, "Why did the writer include that?" Or, "Why mention that specific thing at this time?"

Why do you think John would begin this section by mentioning the upcoming Passover Festival?

What happened at Passover? How did God act on behalf of His people? (Passover commemorates God's deliverance of the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery. The exposition states that God provided deliverance—deliverance that didn't depend on military might.)

John tells us, "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..." (13:3-4). It seems John is telling us that Jesus was intentional about this act of service.

Of all the things Jesus could have done to demonstrate His humility and love to His disciples, why do you think He chose to wash their feet? (Foot washing was a common act performed by servants and considered a subservient task.)

What does this tell us about the way power is understood in God's kingdom?

Our exposition notes that washing the feet of guests was a common courtesy in Jesus' culture. Every household had a person assigned to this unpleasant duty, and by virtue of that assignment the foot washer had the lowest status of anyone in the household.

What would lead Jesus to assume this lowly status? (See end of v.1.)

What does it tell us that Jesus did not tell them what He was going to do, but instead just silently got up and began washing their feet? (Servanthood is not about drawing attention to yourself, but love in action. Jesus took the role of the humble servant, leading by example.)

Invite a group member to read John 13:6-11, then discuss the following,

We often chide Peter for the way he acts without thinking or the way he misunderstands Jesus.

If you were to switch places with Peter in this encounter, how do you think you would have reacted? Why?

If you were Peter and you could go back and re-do this situation, what would you do differently? Reread verses 10-11. What was Jesus saying to Peter (and to us)?

The exposition states, "Many today fail to have a 'part with' Jesus because they will not submit to humble service."

Why is it so difficult for many in our society, even for those within the church, to submit to humble service?

Share about a time when you received humble service from someone else. What did you learn from that experience?

Invite a group member to read John 13:12-17, then discuss the following,

The writer of our exposition gets at the heart of our text saying, “Christlikeness is not simply a matter of an attitude. Followers of Jesus must do as He has done.”

How do you see this playing out in our passage? (Jesus didn’t just tell them what to do, but He demonstrated love and humility in this act and in all He did.)

Do you think it is merely enough for us just to have an interior, purely spiritual, experience with Jesus? Why or why not? (Christlikeness means obeying God’s Word and modeling the life of Christ in all we say and do, through the power of the Holy Spirit.)

Why are Christlike actions necessary in following Jesus?

What do you think Jesus meant by saying that “no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him”? (v. 16)

Connect to My Life and the World

We see in this story that Jesus humiliated himself before the disciples and defined what love looks like.

Think of someone you consider most like Jesus. What makes that person that way? How does he/she model the life of Jesus?

Your thoughts and actions are defining Christlikeness for those in your sphere of influence. Silently consider the following,

Based on the way you live, how would others define Christlikeness? How does it match up with what we see here in the actions of Jesus?

What does it mean for you to be a “foot washer” in your world?

As you close, pray together this prayer from John Wesley:

O Lamb of God, who, both by Your example and precept, instructed us to be meek and humble, give me grace throughout my whole life, in every thought, and word, and work, to imitate Your meekness and humility. Mortify in me the whole body of pride; grant me to feel that I am nothing and have nothing, and that I deserve nothing but shame and contempt, but misery and punishment. Grant, O Lord, that I may look for nothing, claim nothing; and that I may go through all the scenes of life, not seeking my own glory, but looking wholly unto You, and acting wholly for You.