

SERMON JOHN 13 THE MINISTRY OF THE TOWEL

May 3, 2026

On the night that He was arrested by the religious authorities, Jesus shared His last Passover meal with His disciples in the Upper Room. As we all know, He then took this traditional Jewish celebration and gave it new meaning by instituting the Lord's Supper which we celebrate this morning and the first Sunday of every month.

Following the Passover meal, the Apostle Luke tells us that a dispute arose among the disciples as to who was the greatest. In his book *Jesus on Leadership*, Gene Wilkes says that we should cut the disciples some slack because they were just guys being guys. Guys always seem to get into debates over who caught the biggest fish or had the best golf game. The disciples were simply sharing stories about how God had worked through them. However, they had forgotten that it was God and not them who had done the work!

Now this argument might have also been over who would get the best seats at the table – the ones closest to Jesus. Think about it, here's Jesus facing betrayal, death and the cruelest form of punishment known to man at that time – death on the cross, and His disciples are acting like children. It may well be that it was this particular argument that led Jesus to do something totally unexpected in order to teach the disciples and us a lesson in servant leadership. The Gospel of John records this event in the thirteenth chapter, verses 1 through 17.

John 13:1-17

Can you visualize what was happening? While the disciples are arguing about who should sit where at the head table, Jesus get up, takes off His robe, wraps a towel around His waist, takes a basin of water and begins to wash the dusty feet of His friends. The same men one of whom will betray Him before the night is over, another one who will deny knowing Him three times that very same night, and the rest who will desert Him in the Garden of Gethsemane later that night.

Jesus, the Son of God, assumes the humble role of a servant. The roads of Palestine were dirty and dusty. The common people wore sandals which gave little protection against the dirt and mud. Thus, it was customary for a servant to wash the feet of a guest when they arrived at someone's home for a meal. On this night, Jesus assumed the role of a servant. He did what none the disciples had thought of doing or were not willing to do. Remember, they had been arguing as to who was the greatest, why stoop to such a lowly role.

There are many lessons for us in this story. First, Jesus saw a need. The feet of the disciples needed to be washed; however, no one was willing to take on this responsibility. They were too busy arguing as to who was the best. They had that "it's not my job" attitude which unfortunately exists in families, organizations and even churches. You know what I

mean. We're willing to do certain things around the church, but don't expect us to do the menial jobs such as taking out the trash, sweeping the floor, washing the windows or cleaning the restrooms, that's beneath our dignity. We want the important, visible jobs. So, when the opportunities present themselves, do we act like the disciples and sit on our dignity, or do we follow the example of Jesus?

Another lesson that Jesus provided was that the dirty feet were not the real reason for His action. The argument among the disciples over who was the greatest revealed their real need to know who Jesus was and why He had come to live among us and to die for us. Their continued head table mentality revealed that they still did not fully understand why Jesus came to live among us. Jesus told them in Matthew 20:28 that "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve." He showed us that servants with towels are willing to meet whatever need exists – regardless of whose job it is.

Now what do I mean by "head table mentality?" In the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells us that when we are invited to a banquet don't initially take a place of honor such as at the head table because someone more important than you may come in and you may be asked to take a lower seat. This mentality is rooted in traditions where seating arrangements signify status and respect, with the head table representing power and prestige. In the Gospel of Luke's account of the Lord's Supper in chapter 22, verse 27, Jesus asks the disciples: "For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves." Jesus turns the status quo upside down.

The true place for Christians is out in the crowd rather than at the head table. We must be willing to leave our place at the head table to meet the needs of others. We who follow Jesus should never be embarrassed to find ourselves among the kitchen help. We should be glad to serve in the background and gladly work alongside them until the job is complete. As Christians we need to replace the head table with the towel and the washbasin.

Sometimes we feel that we are so important, so distinguished, and of such a high social status that such humble acts of service are beneath us, but not so for our Lord and Savior. He knew that He was the Lord of Lords, yet He took time to wash the feet of His disciples, to assume the role of a servant. We must remember that God is not looking for more super stars; He is looking for more servants.

The *Message* paraphrases Matthew 6:1 as follows: "Be especially careful when you are trying to do good so that you don't make a performance out of it. It might be good theater, but the God who made you won't be applauding." In other words, don't call attention to

yourself. We have all seen situations where people will perform some act of service just to be recognized. For example, a politician will serve at a soup kitchen until the cameras leave, then they are gone to be seen no more. We are called to work behind the scenes without any anticipation of reward or recognition. We should not worry about receiving glory in the eyes of others. Matthew 6:4 states: "Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." It has been said that the Christian when serving should be invisible.

Jesus wanted to set an example for us to follow. On the night that He was betrayed, Jesus once again turned the expectations of the world upside down by assuming the role of the lowliest servant in the household in order to wash the disciples' feet. Jesus demonstrated an attitude of humility and service. We, like the disciples, are challenged today to set aside our desires for power and position, just as He did. We are to follow Jesus into the areas of need in our families, our community, our neighborhoods, and the world. The foundation of God's kingdom is love expressed as service to one another rather than a pursuit of greed, power and control.

Jesus teaches and exemplifies servant leadership – a trait that was as uncommon back then as it is now. This ought to make us think. We live in a world that is full of people who are standing on their rights when they should be like Jesus willing to get dirty helping others. While most people are fighting to reach the top, as Christians we should be reaching for the towels. When we are tempted to think of our dignity, our social status and our rights, let us remember the picture of the Son of God, girded with a towel, kneeling at the feet of His disciples, with a bucket of water.

To wash another's feet is to stoop for the good of another in fulfillment of Jesus' command to love one another as He loves us. The strange thing is that it is the person who stoops like this, like Jesus, that people in the end will honor and remember long after they have passed on. Dave Thomas, the late founder of Wendy's hamburgers, once appeared in the copy of the annual report of the corporation with a mop and a bucket. It was not a gag but was done intentionally so that he could lead by example. At Wendy's, an MBA does not mean a "Master of Business Administration;" instead it means "Mop Bucket Attitude!" Service at the lowliest level makes for great success.

Are you willing to take up the towel, to do the dirty work that no one else wants to do? Or are you going to stand on your rights while there are needs for service all around you? Look for opportunities to serve, to make a difference. It's easy to miss them if we are not alert and making an effort to look. For example, I remember one time when there was a bag of trash in the entrance to the church parking lot. Several cars drove around it, and the drivers

went into the church most likely thinking that that was someone else's job. Someone finally did pick it up and put it in the trash bin.

Sometimes we are so focused on our own problems that we don't see God calling us to help others. We are only thinking of ourselves and not aware of the needs of others. We need to follow the advice attributed to John Wesley: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you can.

As I noted earlier, Jesus said in Matthew 20:28 that He did not come to be served, but to serve. In the washing of the feet of the disciples, He set an example for us to follow. Are you willing to take up the towel and follow Him? We are a church that is devoted to service and to following Jesus' command to love our neighbor. We have all kinds of opportunities to serve. I hope and pray that you will find where you can use your gifts and talents. As you come forward for communion, make a commitment to be willing to serve and to make a difference for the Lord. Then if you are willing to participate in this ministry of the towel, please pick up a towel as you leave in the Narthex.

In closing, if you are not kneeling at the feet of others, wearing a servant's towel, you are in the wrong place. Blessed be those who take up the towel in the name of Jesus. Amen