

“A Servant Is Not Greater Than His Master,” John 13:1-17 (March 5, 2017)

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ² During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray him, ³ 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, ⁴ rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. ⁵ 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.

⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, do you wash my feet?” ⁷ Jesus answered him, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.” ⁸ 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.” ⁹ Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, “The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you.” ¹¹ For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, “Not all of you are clean.”

¹² 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?” ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

PRAY

We are looking at the gospel of John in the weeks leading up to Easter, and today we are in chapter 13, and we’ll study this very famous passage where Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. Sometimes, as a preacher, it’s hard to figure out exactly what a passage is all about. But not with John 13. John spells it all out in verse one: “Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” John 13:1. This passage is about love.

If you are here this morning and you claim to be a Christian, you’ve got to know something: your religion is absolutely worthless without love. The Bible says this so many times. I was tempted this morning in lieu of a sermon just to read all the verses in the New Testament that say this. In 1 John 4:7-8: “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.” If your faith is not turning you into a more and more loving person, something’s drastically wrong with your understanding of what Christianity is.

Jesus says later in John 13:34-35: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” That is so telling. Jesus does not say, “All people will know you are my disciples if you go to church, or do a lot of personal evangelism, or give a lot of money away.” Nor does Jesus say, “All people will know you are my disciples by the stand you take on political issues, or if you do a lot of good deeds out in the community.”

No, Jesus says they will know we are Christians by our love. If you claim to be a Christian, then your faith is worthless without love. Paul says, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.”¹ 1 Corinthians 13:1-3.

Nothing matters without love. But what exactly is it? That’s the only question I want to answer: what is love? It does no good whatsoever to command people to do something they don’t know how to do. But Jesus not only commands us to love, he shows us how to love. And that’s what we’ll look at today. Jesus teaches us five things about love.

First of all, love involves humble service. We read in verses 4-5 that Jesus takes off his outer garments, wrapped a long towel around his waist, and with the end of it he went to each of the twelve disciples and washed their feet.

Washing feet was something that happened every day in ancient Israel. They wore sandals when they walked through their towns and countryside, and of course the roads not only weren’t paved but also were used by livestock. You’d want to get that mess off your feet as soon as you came home or went over to someone else’s house – you wouldn’t want to track it in. Therefore, someone would wash your feet.

Foot washing was seen as an incredibly menial task back then, and it was so looked down upon that there is some evidence that you couldn’t even make your slave do it if he was a Jew. Yet here Jesus is voluntarily doing it for the disciples.

It’s hard for us today to understand how humbling this task was because there’s no modern-day equivalent. There’s nothing I can think of that must be done every day, and is not unusual to have done for you every day, that fits. One thing I read was what if Queen Elizabeth came to your house for supper one night, and after appetizers she disappeared and you went and you found her scrubbing your toilet. She says, “I saw that your toilet was dirty, so I decided to clean it.” If that happened to me I wouldn’t be amazed at her humility. Probably be annoyed or just think it was weird. I would think, what’s wrong with her? Is she the Queen OCD or something?

But Jesus stripped down, took off his outer garments (and that would have meant probably that Jesus stripped all the way down to his loincloth, or his undershorts, which sounds stranger than it was – that was the dress of a slave when he did this kind of work), and washed. The Lord took on the dress of a slave and shocked his disciples by washing his feet because they *would have never expected the Son of God to humble himself to do it*. It was so humiliating and menial. The disciples would have been fine washing Jesus' feet, because he is the Lord. **But they did not want to wash each other's feet, and they felt really uncomfortable with Jesus washing their feet.**

But Jesus could wash their feet to teach that to love means to serve. **Our culture is confused about the nature of love.** We're taught that love is primarily an involuntary emotion. You fall in love, and you can't help who you fall in love with. *But Jesus teaches us that love is not primarily a feeling; it's an action.* Love is not primarily a noun; it's a verb. Love is not a hole you fall into, it's something that you do.

We're told love is all about feelings, but does John anywhere describe Jesus' emotional state as he washes the disciples' feet? No. Not that loving emotions are unimportant; it's just that they are irrelevant to the question of love. You can love someone and feel ambivalent about him. You can love someone and at the moment really, really dislike him. Wives do it to husbands all the time, right? Marriage would be unmanageable if we only served one another when we felt like it.

Nor is love all about personal fulfillment, which is also what our culture tells us. Nothing about personal fulfillment in this passage either. To love means to serve, but it also means humble service – it means meeting the needs of others even if no one could reasonably expect you to do it and especially if you don't want to.

A lot of you, most of you, have siblings. You know how hard it was at times to love them, because there is a real thing called sibling rivalry. You feel like you are competing for the attention and affection of your parents. You're not, or at least hopefully you're not, but when you're a kid (and sometimes when you are an adult) it's hard to understand that. So you can't humble yourself enough to serve them. You find it so hard to be happy for them, to rejoice when they rejoice and weep when they weep. All too often, you rejoice when they weep and weep when they rejoice!

That's how the disciples were with Jesus – rivals. They felt like twelve brothers competing for a dad's affection. But love humbles itself and says, "No, even though I feel like this person is my rival, even though I don't feel loving, I will serve. I will serve my sibling by only speaking good about him. I'll serve by asking how he's doing, and taking a genuine interest in him and his family and his children. I'll serve by doing activities with them he likes doing, not just me. I'll serve by bragging about him in front of my parents rather than subtly cutting him down in front of them."

Love means humble service that, second, seeks the good of the other person. To love someone doesn't mean that you do whatever the other person says. Love doesn't mean that you do all the serving in a relationship. That's not healthy; that's co-dependency.

To love someone means you evaluate the totality of the other person's life and serving them in accordance with what they really need. Love sometimes says, "No," because sometimes that's what is good for the other person – that's what they need.

Jesus loved Peter, but he told him, "No." "He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, do you wash my feet?' ⁷ Jesus answered him, 'What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.' ⁸ 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.'" John 13:6-8. Peter thought he was really being a big man by refusing Jesus' offer to wash his feet, but Jesus knew it was just Peter's pride. Peter just couldn't imagine Jesus washing his feet, so Jesus had to set him straight.

In Ephesians 4, the apostle Paul tells us that if we are really going to love people, we will work to make ourselves mature in the faith so that we can discern what truth is and speak it in love to one another. Over and over again we are exhorted in the New Testament to love others by correcting them, teaching them, admonishing them.

I know of one household where the wife left dirty dishes in the sink, and her husband came home from work and said, "Why the _____ are the dishes still in the sink?" It really hurt her, because that was the first time he'd ever sworn at her. But some friends came around her and said, "You've got to tell him that's wrong, and that's he's destroying your marriage by acting that way." So, she braved his anger and did it. It was for the good of the marriage but also his good. And he was genuinely surprised that his words bothered her and said, "That's how I treat everyone." But he heard her and began to change.

Love speaks the truth for the good of the other person. Love is willing to call sin "sin." Love takes a stand and says, "This is wrong." It says, "No, sex outside of marriage between a man and a woman is wrong." Love takes a stand and says, "No, keeping your money all to yourself and refusing to give it away in big proportions is greed."

Love involves humble service that seeks the good of the other person and, third, trusts in God's sovereignty. We read in verse 3 that "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 and began to wash the disciples' feet. It's because Jesus knew that he had all power in the universe that Jesus was able to get up and wash their feet.

Now, why is it so important to believe that God is in control if you're going to love? I mean, can't atheists love people? Can't people of other faiths love other people? Absolutely! In fact, people who aren't Christians can often surpass Christians in their acts of love and mercy. But no one can be freed to love the way Jesus loved without a deep assurance of God's sovereign control over everything.

When you love, you give up control over your life. The moment you decide to love someone else you give up control in that moment over making sure your needs are met, desires are satisfied, dreams are fulfilled. We might be able to do that for short bursts but sooner or later we will ask the question, "Wait a minute – what's in this for me? Here I

am pouring my life out for this person, sacrificing, passing up these opportunities – what if I am wasting all this effort? What’s in this for me?”

You will stop loving others or you will limit how far you will go when you love them unless you have a strong sense of God’s control over your life and that he means to bless you. “And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.” Matthew 10:42. In other words, if you have a strong faith in God’s sovereignty, then you believe that if even your acts of love are not recognized by anyone ever on earth, *God’s sees them*. He sees them, he will not forget about them, and in the perfect way and in the perfect time *he will reward you for them*. **No act of love can ever be wasted.** We are all on a search for significance and meaning and love, but faith in God’s sovereignty means we are free from requiring those things of other people because *we know we will get them from God*. *Therefore, we are free to love people. We aren’t dependent on them to feel good about ourselves.*

Love involves humble service that seeks the good of the other person while trusting in God sovereignty and, fourth, is willing to serve its enemies. John 13:11-12a: “For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, ‘Not all of you are clean.’”¹² When he had washed their feet ...” Stop right there. We read in verse 11 Jesus knew full well that Judas is just hours away from betraying him, yet Jesus goes ahead and washes his feet anyway.

Friends, this shows us that *just because you know someone hates you is no excuse not to love them*. “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ...” Matthew 5:44. If by “love” Jesus meant, “I say to you, ‘Feel warm and fuzzy feelings’ the way our culture teaches us about love, it would be impossible to love our enemies. But that’s not what love is, right? Love is humble service.

When we love, we seek the good of the other person through acts of service *regardless of how they treat us*. Now, it may be that your relationship is so bad with someone that you can’t get close enough to them to “wash their feet”, to serve them. Sometimes the relationship is so broken you can’t even be in the same room with them. I’ve been mad enough at people that I’ve been tempted to wash their feet with acid instead of water.

But even if we can’t be in the same room as our enemies, we can forgive them. We can pray for our hearts that they would not be hardened against them. We can confess to God as sin the thousand deaths we wished on our enemies. We can long to be reconciled, even if there’s no way to do it right now.

But say it’s so bad, you are so angry with and hurt by someone, that you feel like you can’t even pray for them or be reconciled with them? **Then what you do is you tell that to God and he will take care of it.** In her book *The Hiding Place* Corrie ten Boom, the Dutch woman who during World War II hid Jews from the Nazis until the Nazis found out and then she was sent to a concentration camp herself, wrote about something that happened after the war: “It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former

SS man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing centre at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there – the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie’s pain-blanching face [Betsie was Corrie’s sister who had died in the camp].

“He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. ‘How grateful I am for your message Fräulein,’ he said. ‘To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!’

“His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often ... the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him. I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your Forgiveness.

“As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me. And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world’s healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.” *The Hiding Place*,

Love involves humble service that seeks the good of the other person while trusting in God sovereignty and is willing to serve its enemies because, fifth, it sees the cross is the supreme display of love. What is the foot washing all about, really? Some church traditions have said that it’s a third sacrament, to go along with the Lord’s Supper and baptism. In some churches it’s done on Maundy Thursday every year to remember how Jesus washed the disciples’ feet. I did a wedding once where in the middle of the service the bride sat down on a chair and the groom got on his knees and washed her feet in front of everyone. Not what I would do or recommend, but there’s nothing wrong with it. He wanted to show everyone in the auditorium his desire to serve his wife.

But Jesus tells us plainly what the foot washing is really all about – it’s about the cross. “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.’” John 13:8. Jesus washing Peter’s feet is not really about washing feet. Instead, the foot washing points to what Jesus will do on the cross in a few hours and Jesus is saying, “Peter, unless you get the washing only I can give you, you have no part with me. In other words, you will not inherit eternal life. You will have no portion in heaven. ***You need the washing only my blood can provide.***”

The cross, as we’ve said every week for the last four weeks, is the supreme display of God’s glory, because on the cross Jesus washed not just the feet but the hearts of all who would believe in him. Whether you realize it or not, when you walked in here this morning your biggest problem was not your marriage, not your money, not your career,

not your health. What is it? Your biggest problem is your sin. Your sin that keeps you from God and will one day drag you down to complete destruction. That's what you and I deserve. But on the cross, Jesus loved you enough to cleanse you from all your sin. You know the hymn: "What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus."

Charles Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher in London in the 19th century, said, "Jesus Christ was up on the cross, bleeding, body beaten, twisted, broken, dying, looking down on the people who had denied him and betrayed him, mocking him, spitting at him, and jeering at him, and in the greatest act of love in the history of the universe, HE STAYED!" He stayed. He stayed so he could wash you and me clean.

If love was an emotion, we'd all be lost because I doubt that on the cross Jesus looked at the people he was dying for and said, "You guys make me so happy. It's so easy to love you." If Jesus was looking to be fulfilled, we'd all be lost because I bet he wasn't very satisfied with his life on the cross. But love is humble service, and so Jesus could love us to the end.

So, what must we do in response to this gospel that Jesus loves us? We must love. Jesus makes that clear. "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?' ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.'" John 13:12-17.

Friends, we really only have one job as Christians: love. Our religion is worthless without it. If the master loved, how much more must the servants? I doubt if many of you know the name of Robertson McQuilkin, but at one time he was a very prominent Christian speaker, teacher, and he was the president for 22 years of what is now Columbia International University in South Carolina. His wife Muriel also had a prominent ministry of her own – she had a radio show, she was a gifted artist. But when she was only 60 years old, Muriel was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and by 1990, her disease had progressed to the point where Robertson had to make a decision: either institutionalize Muriel, or resign the presidency of the college. It had gotten to the point where she was happy with Robertson around, but was almost never happy when he was not. She would feel trapped, become very fearful, sometimes almost in terror, and when she couldn't get to Robertson she was in distress.

So Robertson resigned, and for 13 years, from 1990 until 2003, his full-time job was to care for her. And, of course, as the years went on and the disease progressed, it got very, very hard. She lost her ability to speak, and in the days when Muriel could still walk and before they had resorted to diapers, there were "accidents." In *Christianity Today* he wrote about what one those times: "I was on my knees beside her, trying to clean up the mess as she stood, confused, by the toilet. It would have been easier if she weren't so

insistent on helping. I got more and more frustrated. Suddenly, to make her stand still, I slapped her calf—as if that would do any good. It wasn't a hard slap, but she was startled. I was, too. Never in our 44 years of marriage had I ever so much as touched her in anger or in rebuke of any kind. Never; wasn't even tempted, in fact. But now, when she needed me most ... Sobbing, I pled with her to forgive me--no matter that she didn't understand words any better than she could speak them. So I turned to the Lord to tell him how sorry I was. It took me days to get over it.” But it kept happening. He kept getting frustrated. Of course! Who wouldn't?

Robertson McQuilkin loved his wife. She was, by all accounts, an amazing woman. But that wasn't what kept him going through the frustration. He said that the one thing kept him sane and serving in those years was the cross of Jesus Christ. “Of course, the passion of [Christ's] love for me had never cooled. Even in the darkest hours [with Muriel] when I felt my grip slipping and was in danger of sliding into the abyss of doubt, what always caught and held me was the vision of God's best loved, pinioned in criminal execution in my place. How could someone who loved me that much let anything hurt me without cause?”

You see, if love for Robertson McQuilkin was just an emotion or a sense of fulfillment, he would not have retired. He would have put Muriel in a home. But because he knew what love really is, because he knew primarily it as service and because he knew where to find it in the cross, he found new depths to his ability to love his wife. “After I bathed Muriel on her bed ... Valentine's eve [of 1995] and kissed her good night (she still enjoys two things: good food and kissing!), I whispered a prayer over her: ‘Dear Jesus, you love sweet Muriel more than I, so please keep my beloved through the night; may she hear the angel choirs.’

“The next morning I was peddling on my Exercycle at the foot of her bed and reminiscing about some of our happy lovers' days long gone while Muriel slowly emerged from sleep. Finally, she popped awake and, as she often does, smiled at me. Then, *for the first time in months* she spoke, calling out to me in a voice clear as a crystal chime, ‘Love ... love ... love.’ I jumped from my cycle and ran to embrace her. ‘Honey, you really do love me, don't you?’ Holding me with her eyes and patting my back, she responded with the only words she could find to say yes: ‘I'm nice,’ she said.” Those were the last words she spoke. Eight years later, she died.

That's a beautiful story of covenant, faithful love, it's a beautiful story of how his love brought her love out even through the shroud of Alzheimer's, but he would have never been able to tell it without the cross of Jesus Christ. Friends, our calling is to love one another and this city well, but we never will without the cross of Christ. Do you know it?
PRAY