

The People of the Towel

John 13: 1-5, 12-17

Joh 13:1 Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end.

Joh 13:2 And supper being ended, the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's *son*, to betray him;

Joh 13:3 Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God, and went to God;

Joh 13:4 He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself.

Joh 13:5 After that he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe *them* with the towel wherewith he was girded.

Joh 13:12 So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, **Know ye what I have done to you?**

Joh 13:13 **Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for *so* I am.**

Joh 13:14 **If I then, *your* Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet.**

Joh 13:15 **For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.**

Joh 13:16 **Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him.**

Joh 13:17 **If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.**

One of the most intriguing characters in the New Testament is a man by the name of Epaphroditus. His story can be found in [Philippians 2:25-30](#). Epaphroditus is interesting because he was rare individual. Epaphroditus is interesting because he was a servant. That text tells us that Epaphroditus served the Apostle Paul. He was very sick, but still he was worried about the Philippians because he knew they were worried about him.

Paul goes on to tell us that the sickness Epaphroditus suffered came about because he was a servant. In [verse 30](#) Paul says,

Php 2:30 **Because for the work of Christ he was nigh unto death, not regarding his life, to supply your lack of service toward me.**

The phrase “*not regarding his life*” is interesting. It is a gambling term. It means “*to recklessly expose one's life to danger.*” In gambling terminology, it means “*to risk everything on one roll of the dice.*”

Epaphroditus willingly placed his life on the line to serve Paul. He gambled everything for Jesus Christ so that the man of God would be served and that the Philippian church, which had sent him to Paul in the first place, would be well represented.

Around 250 AD, a group of early Christians near ancient Carthage called themselves “*The Gamblers*”. They named themselves after Epaphroditus. These people went into the city of Carthage, during the height of the plagues, when bodies were stacked head high along the streets, and carried the dead outside the city and buried them. They risked their very lives to serve the citizens of Carthage, many of whom hated them because they were Christians. These people possessed the same spirit that dwelt in Epaphroditus.

Where did Christians like Epaphroditus and “*The Gamblers*” get their desire to serve others? After all, it is not a natural desire. I believe they got their spirit of selfless service from the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the passage before us today we see the selfless Savior in action. On the eve of His death, Jesus assumes the place of a slave and serves His disciples. While they were eating the Passover, Jesus gets up from the table and puts on a towel. He poured a basin of water, and He began to wash the disciple's feet. When Jesus did this, He took the place of a slave before His men. He took the place of the lowest kind of slaves, who were called “*the people of the towel*”. They were called this because it was their job to wash the feet of those who were superior to them.

Jesus did this to call His disciples to become a people of the towel as well. He wants every person who follows Him to be a servant. If we are to achieve that goal in our lives, we must develop a heart for others like that which beat within our Savior's breast.

I. We Must Learn From His Labor

Joh 13:4 He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself.

Joh 13:5 After that he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe *them* with the towel wherewith he was girded.

When Jesus rose from supper, wrapped that towel around His body and washed the feet of His disciples, He was performing an act of selfless service for His men. What Jesus did has a lot to teach us about becoming a people of the towel. Several facts present themselves to us in these verses.

- **Washing feet was slaves work.**

Even Jewish servants could not be forced to wash their master's feet. It was a task reserved for the lowest of Gentile slaves. Sometimes, a child would wash a parent's feet; a wife would wash the feet of her husband; or a friend would wash a friend's feet in a display of extreme affection. So, Jesus took the place of a slave before His disciples. He willingly humbles Himself to meet a need in the lives of His men.

- **Jesus washed the feet of His disciples without being asked to do so.**

In fact, they were probably shocked when Jesus began to wash their feet. It was a breach of hospitality to fail to wash a guest's feet. The disciples should have been falling all over one another to wash His feet, but it never entered their minds to serve Him. Apparently, they were all waiting for someone to serve them.

- **Jesus served with no expectation of reward.**

No one even said thank you. He did what He did just because He wanted to do it.

- **Jesus served the others with a willing heart.**

No one had to twist His arm. He voluntarily took the place of a slave and served His men.

- **Jesus served those who did not deserve to be served.**

Think about it!

- He washed the feet of Simon Peter. Before the night would end those feet would stand at a Roman fire as Peter denied Jesus three times.
- He washed the feet of Judas Iscariot. His feet had already carried him to the Jewish leaders where he bargained away the life of Jesus for a few pieces of silver. Before this night would end, those same feet would carry him back to the Jews where he would completely abandon Jesus to His enemies.
- Jesus washed the feet of the other ten and before the night would end, all of those feet would run away in fear. Jesus knew all this, yet He served them all anyway.

Look at verse 5. When it says that Jesus “*began to wash ... and to wipe*” the feet of the disciples, both those verbs are in a tense that speaks of continual, ongoing activity. In other words, Jesus kept at the task until it was completed. He worked until every dirty foot has been cleansed.

Jesus did what He did for a very specific purpose. While He has His men were celebrating the Passover, the disciples were occupied with other matters. While they were in the upper room that night, Jesus was occupied with the weighty matters of eternity. He knew that before the night ended, He would go to Gethsemane where He would labor in prayer before His Father. He knew that Judas would betray Him to the Jews. He knew that the Romans would arrest Him and put Him on trial. He knew that before twenty-four hours would pass, He would be condemned, rejected by His people, beaten, crucified and buried. He knew that He would bear the sins of His people on Calvary and die in their place. His mind carried all these burdens, still He wanted to serve His men.

While Jesus carried the burden of the lost on His heart, His men were worried about far more trivial matters. Luke 22:24 tells us that they were arguing about who should be the greatest among the disciples. Jesus used this opportunity to teach them what being a true servant was all about.

If we are completely honest with ourselves, most of us are like the disciples. There are very few who truly possess a servant's heart. Most are willing to be served, but not too many are willing to serve others. Like Jesus, we should be willing to serve others regardless of the cost.

Rom 12:10 *Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another;*

Php 2:4 *Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.*

We must be willing to humble ourselves and do whatever is necessary to serve others. Someone has to do the grunt work!

- We must learn to serve without having to be asked.
- We must learn to serve others willingly, with no thought of reward.

Mat 6:1 *Take heed that ye do not your alms (deeds, work) before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven.*

Mat 6:2 *Therefore when thou doest *thine* alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.*

Mat 6:3 *But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth:*

Mat 6:4 *That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.*

Whose praise would you rather have? That of men or that of the Lord?

- We must learn to serve those who are selfish and who refuse to serve.
- We must teach the next generation how to serve. Teach them by encouraging them to be more involved in service. Teach them by example!

There is much we can learn from our Lord's labor. He served others and set a standard for us that we should strive to reach in our own service. That is one step toward our becoming a people of the towel.

II. We Must Learn From His Lordship

Joh 13:12 *So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, **Know ye what I have done to you?***

Joh 13:13 ***Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for *so* I am.***

Joh 13:14 If I then, *your* Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet.

Joh 13:15 For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.

Joh 13:16 Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him.

Joh 13:17 If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.

Everything Jesus did that night reminds us of Who He is and what He came to this world to do. Let me run through a short list of facts that stands out.

Joh 13:4 He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself.

- Jesus rose from supper. He had already risen from His fellowship with God the Father and God the Spirit in Heaven to come to earth.
- Jesus laid aside His outer garment. Jesus had already laid aside His heavenly glory to be born in human flesh.

Php 2:5 Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:

Php 2:6 Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:

Php 2:7 But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:

Php 2:8 And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

- Jesus girded Himself with a towel. The word refers to a “*knotted cloth*”, or a slave's service apron. Jesus had already robed His deity in humanity when He came to this earth as a man.

Joh 13:5 After that he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe *them* with the towel wherewith he was girded.

- Jesus poured water into a basin to cleanse the dirty feet of His men. Jesus would soon pour out His precious blood to cleanse the dirty souls of His people.
- Jesus washed and dried the feet of the disciples. Jesus would wash away the awful stains of sin from the souls of all those who would receive Him!

I am just trying to remind you Who this was that took water and a towel to wash the feet of the disciples. This man was and is God in human flesh. This was and is the Lord of glory. This is the Creator of all things.

Col 1:16 For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether *they be* thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him:

This is God in human flesh.

Joh 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Joh 1:14 And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

This is the Savior, Redeemer and Deliverer of lost sinners.

1Pe 1:18 Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, *as* silver and gold, from your vain conversation *received* by tradition from your fathers;

1Pe 1:19 But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot:

1Pe 1:20 Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you,

1Pe 1:21 Who by him do believe in God, that raised him up from the dead, and gave him glory; that your faith and hope might be in God.

This is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

Rev 19:16 And he hath on *his* vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.

If the Lord Jesus Christ would condescend to serve the disciples; we have no excuse for not serving others. If He would wash the feet of Peter and Judas; how much more should we seek ways to serve those around us?

The fact is serving others is not an option; it is a command! In [verse 14](#), Jesus says:

Joh 13:14 If I then, *your* Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet.

Joh 13:15 For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.

Look at the word “ought.” This word is in a tense that suggests we should always be washing feet. Now I’m not saying that you need to be walking around every day with a wash pan and a rag. This word has the idea of “*the good will due to another*”. In other words, the Lord is saying that we should always be looking for ways to serve others for His glory. We should continually be searching for ways to demonstrate the love of God to those around us!

Some people are especially gifted to serve others. Romans chapter 12 teaches us this. And those people are pretty easy to identify. However, regardless of whether we have that specific gift or not, we all can and should be actively serving others for the glory of God. We are never more like Jesus than when we are serving others. In [Luke 6:40](#), Jesus says,

Luk 6:40 The disciple is not above his master: but every one that is perfect shall be as his master.

When we humble ourselves and assume the position of a slave before others, we demonstrate true Christ likeness. When we do, He is gloried and He will honor our service in His way for His glory.

Jas 4:10 Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.

1Pe 5:5 Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all *of you* be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.

1Pe 5:6 Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time:

Look at verse 17 of our text:

Joh 13:17 If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.

Serving others is a recipe for happiness. When we can come to the place where we stop worrying about who is doing what and we simply serve who we can where we can, we will live a more blessed Christian life. If we could ever come to the place where it does not matter who does what job; who gets the glory for what is done; or even why the task needs to be accomplished, we would be developing into a people of the towel.

This brings me to my final point. (And everyone said....)

III. We Must Learn From His Love

Joh 13:1 Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end.

One final lesson presents itself in this passage. This thought tells us why Jesus did everything He did. It tells us why He came into this world in the first place. It tells us why He became a man. It tells us why He laid aside the riches of Heaven to embrace poverty on earth. It tells us why He died for us on the cross. It tells us why He willingly assumed the place of a slave to serve His men.

It's very simple. [Verse 1](#) tells us that Jesus knew His time with His men was at an end. He knew He was leaving, and even at the end of His earthly ministry, His heart was filled with love for His men. Before He leaves them, He is determined to teach them a much needed lesson in humility. Before He leaves, He is determined to demonstrate the depths of His love for them. So, He assumes the place of a slave and He washes their feet. He served them because He loved them!

His love for us explains everything He did for us. His love for us explains [2 Cor. 8:9](#), which says,

2Co 8:9 For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.

His love for us explains it all, from Bethlehem to Calvary, through the tomb back to glory. He did it all because He loved us!

Just as love compelled the Savior to serve, our love for others should compel us to serve others for His glory. When we love as we should, we will place the needs of others ahead of our own needs. [1 Cor. 10:24](#) reminds us of our obligation to others. It says,

1Co 10:24 Let no man seek his own, but every man another's *wealth*.

True love manifests the heart of Epaphroditus. True love lays everything on the line for the glory of God and for the good of others. True love always fleshes out the heart of [Matt. 22:37-40](#) which says,

Mat 22:37 Jesus said unto him, **Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.**

Mat 22:38 **This is the first and great commandment.**

Mat 22:39 **And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.**

Mat 22:40 **On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.**

The bottom line is this: Genuine love serves others.

What does it look like?

1Co 13:4 Charity suffereth long, *and* is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

1Co 13:5 Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;

1Co 13:6 Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;

1Co 13:7 Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

I suppose I could ask you if you were a person of the towel. However, I think that it would be a silly question. You see, I suspect that true service is an outgrowth of genuine humility. Just as the truly humble person has no idea that he is humble, the true servant doesn't see what they do as anything special. That's true because humility is not merely thinking little of yourself; it is not thinking of yourself at all.

A true servant doesn't think about how he or she feels. A true servant looks at the needs around him and just does what needs to be done, without being asked; without expectation of reward; without expectation of thanks; with nothing more at heart than a desire to love and act like Jesus Christ. And that, my brothers and sisters, is what defines the people of the towel.