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Bridgeway Church

John 13-17 / #3

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Sermon Summary #3

Jesus is the Servant and We are the Served

John 13:1-20

If someone were to ask you what it is about Christianity that makes it unique among the many world religions, how would you answer them? What is it about the Christian faith that sets it apart and in doing so helps to confirm its truthfulness? What is it about Christianity that makes it so appealing?

That question could be answered in countless ways. I immediately think of the truth of the Trinity, that the one and only God of the Bible is also three persons, each equal in power and glory with the other. I think of the incarnation: the truth of God the Son becoming a man in the person of Jesus Christ. I think of the glorious truth of the gospel itself, that God graciously has done everything necessary in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to reconcile us to himself forever. All these wonderful truths that we find in Scripture serve to testify to the reality and glory of the Christian faith.

But there is yet another truth that must be noted, one that is directly and explicitly seen in our passage in John 13. When you look closely at this story, you discover a singularly glorious and altogether unexpected truth about Jesus. While the disciples sit frozen and fearful, no doubt wondering who is going to get up and assume the highly unpleasant task of washing everyone's feet, Jesus gets up, girds himself with a towel, and proceeds to do what only household servants were expected to do. Jesus doesn't wait for them to serve him. He takes the initiative to serve them.

This is one of the most shocking scenes in all of the gospel of John. And it is one of the most distinctive truths of Christianity. In every other religion or sect or philosophical movement, the leader is served by his followers. *They* build *him* or *her* a huge mansion. They give him or her all their money. They wait upon their leader, hand and foot. They exist to make their leader comfortable. They exist to supply their leader with whatever he or she may need. They exist to provide their leader with wealth and safety and whatever luxuries are needed. In every other religion, the followers serve, wait upon, make provision for, and give their possessions to their leader.

But not in Christianity. Jesus did *not* come to *be* served by others but to *serve* them. ***Jesus does not lead by being served but by serving.***

So here is what we are going to do. We aren't going to approach our text today in the way you would expect. I'm not going to unpack it line upon line. Instead, ***I want to provide you with a broad biblical framework for understanding the underlying meaning of John 13 and its relevance for us today.*** I want you to see in this passage and in this episode in the life of Jesus a singular truth that will enable you to understand more clearly both the nature of God and how you and I can most effectively honor and glorify him in our lives.

The point of this passage is fairly straightforward: Jesus, in humility, serves his followers by washing their feet, so that they (we) in turn, as his representatives, might have an example of how they, in the power God supplies, might serve others.

Beneath and behind what we read in John 13 is that singular truth that makes Christianity differ from every other religion or philosophy. It is stated by Paul in his speech on Mars Hill (Acts 17:24-25) and also by Jesus himself (Mark 10:45; Luke 22:27). Here is what Paul said:

“The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” (Acts 17:24-25).

Here is what Jesus said:

“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

Again, Jesus makes much the same point in Luke 22:27. There Jesus said:

“But I am among you as the one who serves” (Luke 22:27).

Let me put this in as simple and straightforward terms as I can. God has no needs that you and I can meet. God has no wounds that you can heal. God has no deformities that you can rectify. God does not need information, strength, counsel, service, support, sustenance, food, water, money, or our resources.

God didn't create the world so he could have you. He created the world so you could have him! God didn't create the world so that you and I could meet his needs. He created the world so that he could glorify himself by meeting ours.

What I'm going to say next may be a severe blow to your ego: God doesn't need you and me. He lacks nothing. There isn't anything we can give him or do for him that he doesn't already have by virtue of the fact that he is God. We cannot serve him as if he were needy, give to him as if he were lacking, supply him as if he were depleted, support him as if he were dependent, empower him as if he were weak, inform him as if he were ignorant, or heal him as if he were wounded. To relate to God or to worship him as if this were not true is to insult and dishonor God.

Nothing could be any clearer than this: if you come to God in order to serve him, as if he were needful of you and what you have to offer, you insult him to the core, you dishonor him with every breath and word and physical gesture.

What comes to mind when you think about "serving" another person? Clearly, it is their need, whether that be your ***physical*** performance of some task for which they lack either the strength or time, or perhaps your ***emotional*** support during a season of distress and depression, or perhaps your ***monetary*** aid during a time of financial crisis or stress, or perhaps your ***encouragement*** during a time of despondency and despair.

Service comes in any number of forms but in every instance it is important because ***the one being served is lacking in some capacity or handicapped in some way or is needy, whether physically or emotionally or financially or spiritually. Thus, invariably, the person who serves is the one who is magnified. The person who serves is put on display as being generous or kind or strong or resourceful.*** The person who is served is revealed as weak or deficient or depleted or in distress.

Do you not see, then, that anytime you propose to "serve" God you dishonor him? To come to God in a time of worship or any other time, for that matter, as if he were needy and in lack and your service was designed to bolster him and provide for him and supply what he lacks is to draw attention to yourself. Far from glorifying God, serving God in this way demeans and dishonors and detracts from his glory.

I can hear you saying right now: "Wait a minute Sam! Doesn't the Bible describe us as being the 'servants' of God? Are we not repeatedly in Scripture commanded to serve' him? So, how can you say that 'serving' God is evil and dishonoring to God?"

Paul called himself a "bond-servant" of Christ Jesus (Rom. 1:1) and exhorted the church in Rome to "serve the Lord" (Rom. 12:11; see also 16:18). So we must begin by defining what it means to be God's "servants" without belittling him as needful of us.

First of all, we are rightly called God's "servants" or "bond-slaves" because he owns us: we "have been bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:20), the blood of Christ. We belong to him. We "serve" God in the sense that we acknowledge his ownership of us, his lordship over us. We offer willing submission to God's claim on our lives.

Second, we are rightly called God's "servants" insofar as we submit to his authority and acknowledge his right to tell us to do whatever he pleases. But we have mistakenly interpreted God's commands as directives for how *we* are to serve *him*, when in fact they are God's way of defining how *he* wants to serve *us*. Whenever the Scriptures call for my obedience I immediately turn to the Son of God who has promised to carry my burden and infuse me with his power to do his will. Jesus does not need my help. He commands my obedience and then amazingly offers *his* help. That is why obedience is not hard (see Deut. 30:11; Matt. 11:28-30 [contrast Matt. 23:4]; 1 John 5:3). Christ's "yoke" is easy and his "burden" is light because *whatever God requires, he provides!* The God who commands is the God who mobilizes all his inexhaustible resources and divine energy on behalf of those who wait on him.

The radical call to commitment and obedience to everything commanded in Scripture is not something we do for him, but things he enables us to do for others. The reason we may confidently sacrifice ourselves in the service of others is because Jesus will sacrifice himself in serving us. He has promised to serve me by sustaining my will as I risk loving those who may not love back. There is nothing to which he calls me that he does not gladly and with unwavering consistency promise to provide that I may fulfill.

Just consider our story here in John 13. Jesus says: "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you." (John 13:14-15). He doesn't say, "I have washed your feet so that you would in turn wash mine." Nor does he say, "I have washed your feet so that you will love me enough to do things for me that I need to have done." Rather, he serves his disciples so that they will have an example and the power to serve others.

John Piper points to another metaphor that illustrates this truth. God, he says, is like a doctor and you are the patient. If I suffer a broken leg, I don't go to my doctor with a diagnosis written out in advance and a plan for my rehabilitation. I go to a doctor because he is skilled to understand my predicament and to prescribe a remedy. I honor and glorify my doctor by trusting him/her to provide me with the remedy I need to get well. I don't elevate myself above my doctor by seeking his insight and aid. The doctor's glory is revealed in serving me as his patient and using all his knowledge and resources to relieve my discomfort or heal my disease.

Likewise, God is most honored when we seek from him the healing and restoration and joy and fulfillment that he delights in providing for us. ***We are the patients in need of help. God is the physician who provides a cure.*** "Patients do not serve their physicians. They trust them for good prescriptions. The Sermon on the Mount and the Ten Commandments are the Doctor's prescribed health regimen, not the Employer's job description" (John Piper, *Desiring God*, 147). Thus we honor God most when we trust him to serve us as a physician serves his patients.

So, yes, serve God, but not because you believe your service supplies God with what he otherwise lacks. Or, to use Paul's words, "God is not served ***as though he needed anything,***" or ***God is served, but not because he needs anything.***" If the motivation for your service is your belief that God is needy and dependent then you dishonor him. But if your service is grounded in your confidence that whatever you do or offer him is simply returning what he has already given you or done in and through you, you honor him.

God can't be served because he has no deficiencies that need to be replenished. Instead we have the deficiencies and he is infinite in wisdom and power and readiness to serve us. He has the resources. We have the needs. So, how do we serve God without belittling him? Peter tells us in 1 Peter 4.

"As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength

that God supplies – in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Peter 4:10-11).

In other words, by all means serve God, ***but always as the one who receives, not as the one who gives***. Serve as the recipient, not the donor. Serve as the beneficiary, not the benefactor. His purpose in the earth is not sustained by our energy. Rather, we are sustained and strengthened by his. We have nothing of value that is not already his by right.

Listen again to what Jesus said in these passages, one from Mark’s gospel and the other from Luke’s gospel.

“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

“But I am among you as the one who serves” (Luke 22:27).

Here Jesus makes a claim that is utterly unique among other religious leaders or teachers. Jesus is not just another moral philosopher or religious zealot with a set of rules who is trying to drum up a following of men and women who will wait on him hand and foot. Jesus says to his followers, ***“I didn’t come to the earth so that you could serve me! I came so that I might serve you.”***

Jesus did not come looking for people to work for him (or to wash his feet). He came to work for us. He came to serve us. ***Jesus didn’t come to recruit you to meet God’s needs. God has no needs. Jesus came to bring you the resources of God to meet your needs.*** He died to meet your needs. He rose from the dead to meet your needs. He reigns on high to meet your needs and to make you happy in him forever.

In a passage that virtually drips with divine sarcasm, God slaps our arrogance in the face when he says,

“If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world and its fullness are mine. . . . Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me” (Ps. 50:12, 15).

Here God is saying to us: “You don’t glorify me by trying to feed me or by bringing me things you think I lack. You glorify me by coming to me in your moment of trouble and desperation. I deliver you; I rescue you. In that way, I get glorified and you get set free!”

When we come to God for rescue and deliverance and help in our time of need, everyone wins. We get rescued and God gets honored! We must remember that “the gospel is not a Help Wanted ad. Neither is the call to Christian service. On the contrary, the gospel commands *us* to give up and hang out a Help Wanted sign” (Piper, 146).

Again, I know how odd this will sound. But listen anyway. God is our servant in the sense that he uses all his divine resources to help us and strengthen us and support us and provide our needs as we obey his command to serve others. In one of his parables, Jesus said,

“Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them” (Luke 12:35-37).

Here we see that even in the age to come, when Christ appears a second time in splendor and power and majesty, he comes to serve! That is his glory. His glory is revealed in the overflow of his grace to supply the needs of weak and dependent people like you and me!

So all serving that honors God must first be a receiving. The apostle Paul said that he “worked harder” than anyone else; but it wasn’t ultimately him but rather “the grace of God” that was with him and in him (1 Cor. 15:10). That is why he commands us in Philippians 2:12-13 to work out our salvation in fear and trembling, “because” it is ***God*** who works in us, both to will and to do his good pleasure.

Someone here at Bridgeway once asked me: “If God doesn’t need anything from me, how do I bring pleasure to him?” Consider these texts:

“For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience – by word and deed” (Rom. 15:18; cf. 2 Tim. 4:17).

“Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” (Heb. 13:20-21).

Let me clear up, once and for all, a horrific caricature of God. God is not a celestial bully who puts his strength on display by grinding into submission human beings who are weaker than he is. ***God is a loving heavenly Father whose greatest joy is putting his greatness and glory on display by offering himself to us as an inexhaustible reservoir of power and energy so that we can do for others what he has commanded that we do.***

We honor God, not by pretending to give him what we arrogantly think he needs, but by praying for and posturing ourselves to receive all that he is and has obtained for us in Jesus. Why? ***Because the very heart of God's glory is the fullness and abundance of grace that overflows in mercy to needy people like you and me. God will gladly receive from us only that which reveals our dependence and his all-sufficiency.***

Think about how this relates to our worship of God. For years I used to view worship as a time during which I would give of myself to God. But ***worship is primarily a craving for God.*** Worship is me declaring to the world that God is my all in all, that he alone can quench the thirst of my soul and satisfy the hunger of my heart. ***How many of you came today tired and broken and empty and weak, filled with worry and doubt, saying in your hearts: “I can’t worship God. I have nothing to give”? Good!***

David had this in mind when he compared his yearning for God with the vivid imagery of a deer in a desert land, panting for life-giving water. “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Ps. 42:1-2a).

The oasis says to the weary, worn out deer: “So what did you bring me today that I might be honored in you?” To which the deer responds: “Only one thing: my thirst! Only this, that if I don’t drink from the water that you supply, I’ll die!”

The focus in this word-picture is not the deer, but the water. It is on the cool, refreshing, sustaining properties of the desert stream that all eyes are fixed. The deer brings nothing to the stream but its desperation and its thirst. This is how we must come to God when we worship: desperate, thirsty, hungry, yearning, and dependent.

“You are the thirsty deer and God is the overflowing spring.

You are the lost sheep and God is the good shepherd.

You are the bankrupt beggar and God is the generous philanthropist.”

Who, in each of these relationships, gets the glory? It’s the overflowing spring. It’s the good shepherd. It’s the generous philanthropist.

If you feel strong and self-sufficient and morally in tune with God; if you feel able to serve God and make independent contributions to God and his work, then Paul’s words in Acts 17 that God “is *not* served by human hands as though he needed anything” will not be good news to your ears. In other words, self-sufficient people who think they can supply God with what he lacks are deluding themselves.

But if you are weak and helpless and sinful and know that any good you do, you need God’s help to do it, this comes as the best news in the world. God is the kind of God who cannot be served, but loves to serve. To those who feel morally self-sufficient this is bad news. It threatens to take away our basis for boasting. But to those who feel morally desperate and hopeless before a holy and infinitely righteous God, this is good news.

The bottom line is that you and I must come to worship **hungry!** We must not come with hands full of goodies and gifts, thinking that worship is fundamentally where we serve and feed God. God is not in need of us. We are in need of him. Don’t come to God with a cooked goose on a platter, as if God were hungry. Come with open hands and an empty belly and let him honor himself by filling you! Worship is a feast in which God is the host, the cook, the waiter, and the meal itself.

For years I had been led to believe that to come into a worship service conscious of my need and my desire for joy and my hunger for satisfaction was sinful and selfish. I was led to believe that to come to worship with the expectation and desire and hope of finding personal joy ruined or undermined the moral value and virtue of praise. “Come and focus on God, not your need,” I was told (quite sternly, most often). But what if I come and focus on **my need for God** and exalt him by declaring that he alone satisfies my soul and meets the needs of my heart?

So, when you come to God in worship or in prayer or as you will in just a moment to the Lord’s Supper, come this way:

Come confessing your inability to do or offer anything that will empower God or enrich God or enhance God or expand God.

Come with heartfelt gratitude to God for the fact that whatever you own, whatever you are, whatever you have accomplished or hope to accomplish is all from him, a gift of grace.

Come declaring in your heart and aloud that if you serve, it is in the strength that God supplies; if you give money, it is from the wealth God has enabled you to earn; if it is praise of who he is, it is from the salvation and knowledge of God that God has provided in Christ Jesus.

Come to declare and celebrate the all-sufficiency of God in meeting your every need. You praise his love because if he were not loving you would be justly and eternally condemned. You praise his power because if he were weak you would have no hope that what he has promised he will fulfill. You praise his forgiving mercy because apart from his gracious determination to wash you clean in the blood of Christ you would still be in your sin and hopelessly lost.

Come with an empty cup and say: "God, glorify yourself by filling it to overflowing."

Come with a weak and wandering heart and say: "God, glorify yourself by strengthening me to do your will and remain faithful to your ways."

Come helpless and say: "God, glorify yourself by delivering me from my enemies and troubles."

Come with your sin and say: "God, glorify yourself by setting me free from bondage to my flesh and breaking the grip of lust and envy and greed in my life."

Come with your hunger for pleasure and joy and say: "God, glorify yourself by filling me with the fullness of joy. God glorify yourself by granting me pleasures that never end. God, glorify yourself by satisfying my heart with yourself. God, glorify yourself by entralling me with your beauty . . . by overwhelming me with your majesty . . . by taking my breath away with fresh insights into your incomparable and infinite grandeur. God, glorify yourself by shining into my mind the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

So come and in faith let Jesus serve you by washing your feet so that you can know how to wash the feet of others.