

Love's Full Extent

Loving the Way Jesus Loves

By Philip Ryken

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Bible Text: 1 Corinthians 13:4-5; John 13:1-19

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Tenth Presbyterian Church

1701 Delancey Street

Philadelphia, PA 19103-6714

Website: www.tenth.org

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/tenth

A worker is defined by the tools of the trade.

One of my children was taking an exam for kindergarten placement and was asked what his or her father did for a living.

“Oh, he works on computers,” the child said.

And it is true. I often do much of my work of preparation for teaching and preaching on a laptop. Many, many people do work on computers these days. But there are also more traditional tools of some trades. The pencil and straight edge and drafting table of an architect, for example, or a plumber with his bucket and set of wrenches, a violinist with her Stradivarius; these are the tools of the trade.

Now our Lord Jesus, on occasion, took up the tools of various trades. When he was a boy serving with his father the carpenter, he used the hammer and chisel of a stone mason. At the end of his life when it came time for him to die the only tool he needed was an old rugged cross.

But one week before that passion our Lord Jesus took the tools of a humble servant, a towel, a basin of water and washed the dirty feet of his disciples. And with that simple act of infinite condescension, the Lord of the universe demonstrated the self denial of his saving work and, at the same time called every one of his disciples to a life of humble service.

Well, I believe this act of love, as we will consider it in John 13, illustrates very well the kind of love that the apostle Paul has been sketching for us in 1 Corinthians 13. You might just open your bulletin to notice the verse or even just the phrase that we will be considering from 1 Corinthians this morning where the apostle says, “Love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude.”¹

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:4-5.

And before illustrating the truth of that kind of love from the life of Christ, I want to take a few moments just to talk about these words so that we have it clearly in mind what kind of love the apostle Paul is talking about.

Each of these terms very carefully chosen and one of the things they have in common is that all of them were used earlier in the book of 1 Corinthians.

As he wrote this epistle Paul was criticizing the Corinthians for the way that they were treating one another. They were envious, boastful, arrogant and rude, everything that love is not.

Here is something else these words have in common. They all relate to how we handle some of the good things that happen in life.

I suppose everyone knows how hard it is to deal with the hard things that happen in life, the difficulties and discouragements and disappointments. But sometimes it can be just as hard to know how to handle the good things in life in a godly way.

Envy is a sinful response to the success of others, the good things that happen to them, whereas boasting and arrogance and rudeness, these are all sinful responses to any success we have of our own.

And so start with the success of others. The New Testament word for envy more literally means to burn or to boil. And so Anthony Thistleton, as a very careful linguist, translates as follows. "Love does not burn with envy."

Understand that envy is really a form of hostility. It is not merely the desire to have what someone else has, that is coveting. But rather the desire to see our rivals lose what they have.

Think, for example, of Joseph and his brothers who were so envious of their brother's status as the favored son that they threw him down into a deep dark pit. That is what envy wants to do. It wants to bring someone down. Or, to bring things, perhaps, closer to home, it is one thing to hope that the Phillies win, but it is another thing to hope that the Yankees lose. That is envy for you.

And the Corinthians were guilty of this kind of envy. Back in chapter three the apostle Paul accused them of envy and strife. It was a community characterized by very sharp theological and social differences. And the Corinthians were tempted to have a spirit of rivalry towards other church members who had spiritual gifts that were different from their own.

Instead of seeing the good in other people and believing the best about them, they criticized their gifts and diminished their accomplishments.

But, you see, that is something that love never does. When someone else is promoted or praised or elevated the loving person is so fully content with his or her own situation in life, that he or she is able to take joy and satisfaction in someone else's success.

And so here is a test for us as we ask ourselves whether we really do love the way that Jesus loves.

How do I really feel when someone of equal ability or maybe even as it seems to me lesser ability advances beyond me?

Well, there are also some sins that we need to avoid when we meet with our own success in life. It can be hard to see something good to happen to one of our rivals, but it can be just as hard to handle our own good fortune in a godly way.

The Scripture says that in such circumstances, love does not boast or brag. In other words, the loving person does not demand attention for his or her own accomplishments. And, really, it is impossible to love and to boast at the same time, because in boasting we demand the center stage whereas love shines the spotlight of its affection on some of the other players in the drama of life.

But, really, the spotlight can only fall in one place at the same time.

This kind of boasting is usually a sin of speech in which we use our words to make sure that people notice how great we are.

Louise Meads calls boasting our own private advertising business, our little campaign to publicize an image of ourselves.

But now Jesus said that what comes from the mouth actually proceeds from the heart and so Paul here is sure to make sure that he mentions arrogance which is a sin of attitude. It is not just the words of the mouth, but the thoughts of the heart. The image behind the New Testament word for arrogance is of something that is puffed up.

I like Anthony Thistleton's translation, again, for this. "Love does not inflate its own importance.

That captures the metaphor behind the word.

Well, let me tell you something else that love does not do. It does not behave rudely or obnoxiously. A word that Paul uses for rude has a very wide range of meaning, anything from bad manners to shameful sexual sin. But in this particular context where Paul has been talking about envy and arrogance, I think he is using the word to describe the bad way that we tend to treat people when we think that we are better than they are.

Using bad manners may seem like a very small failing to you if it really seems like a failing at all, but the Bible says that when we do not treat people nicely or properly it is

really a failure to love. And that is always our calling as Christians, even in the little things of life.

Now it is apparent from many things that that Paul says in this letter to the Corinthians that they were guilty of these very sins. Some of them boasted of superior wisdom and knowledge. Others bragged that they were more spiritual than their brothers or sisters. Still others had an over inflated sense of their own importance. And so repeatedly through his letter Paul uses some of these very vocabulary words to show how puffed up they were.

You are arrogant, he says at a certain point in his letter. And I think by using these same vocabulary words in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul is showing the Corinthians very clearly the root of their spiritual problem. It is a lack of love.

And this is not our own problem as well? Why are we green with envy when someone else gets what we think we deserve? Why is it so important to us that other people notice and praise our accomplishments? Why are we rude to certain people in certain situations?

It is because we love ourselves the most and sometimes hardly love others at all.

What we need, don't we, is more of the love of Jesus, more of his love for us, his grace through the cross and more of his love in us as we learn how to love other people.

I think we see that love on every page of the gospel, but, perhaps, no more... nowhere do we see the humility of Christ's love more clearly than in John chapter 13. And let me ask you to turn there in your Bibles. This is the main illustration and exemplification of the kind of love that Paul is showing to us in 1 Corinthians 13.

John 13, it is on page 900 in the church Bible.

It was near the end of his life , roughly a week before his crucifixion and resurrection and Jesus was meeting with his disciples for dinner and at the beginning of the chapter John gives us this remarkable verse that:

“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

This verse testifies to the eternal love of Jesus Christ. John looks to the past, to all of the love that he had shown to his own disciples and his earthly ministry and we have been seeing that in recent weeks. We have seen his love worked out in his miracles like the feeding of the 5012 or the raising of his friend Lazarus from the dead. We have seen his love in his forgiveness like the sinful woman who came to him weeping over her sins and loving Jesus because of it. This was the love that Jesus had been showing to his own.

² Jon 13:1.

And now the time had come for his departure and Jesus would show his disciples even more of his love. He would love them to the end. Or, as the New International Version has it in a very evocative phrase, Jesus would show them the full extent of his love.

What could that mean for the Son of God to show the full extent of his love? To love his own disciples to the very end? It means not simply to the end of his life or to the end of our lives, although that is also true, but it means to the very end of all things.

The word John uses for end is also the word for perfection. And so it is with the love of Jesus. It is an everlastingly perfect love.

But now how specifically does Jesus show us that love? John says that Jesus is about to do that. Now how does he do it?

Well, this verse at the beginning of chapter 13 is really a major turning point in the whole gospel of John and I think John is partly looking forward to everything that will happen from here until the very end of the gospel.

Jesus has now made his triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem, the place where he had gone up to die.

At the end of chapter 12 and verse 47 he announces that he has come to save the world. And in the chapters that follow that is exactly what he will do. He will offer his life as the atonement for sin.

And so when John says that Jesus would show the full extent of his love, it is all of that love. It is the love of the cross, the love through the empty tomb, the love that leads up to the skies.

And I think we should also see that there is a more immediate context for what John says in verse one. Yes, it includes everything that Jesus would do for the salvation of the world, but all of that would be encapsulated in this very next simple thing that Jesus would do. What Jesus did for his disciples at the dinner table.

You know, people often say that actions speak louder than words and maybe they do. Some years ago I had overheard some people in a church talking about the ministry of Warren Sanny who for more than 50 years was very active in teaching discipleship through the ministry of Navigators, had a profound influence on many thousands of people through his teaching ministry. But as these people talked about his ministry in their church, they remembered something that made an even more profound impression on them anything he ever said. They remembered him taking off his coat and tie on a Sunday morning to change a flat tire for a single mother from the church.

Sometimes actions do speak louder than words or, at least, they confirm the truth of the words that we say.

And the ministry of Jesus was like that. He not only talked the talk, but also walked the walk. Or maybe in this chapter we should say he kneeled the kneel, because here we see Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, a living parable that was a dramatic display of the non arrogance and non rudeness of his non envious love, which never begrudges us anything, but always loves to love and to give and to give some more.

Now when Jesus performed this humble act of service, he was taking the position of a slave, but he was not forgetting who he was as the Son of God. No, notice what it said in verse three.

“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,”³ then proceeded to do the things that the did. He knew that he was the one and only Son of God. He knew that he had come from glory and would return to glory. But rather than holding enviously to his position, or treating people rudely and arrogantly, he offered humble service to his disciples.

And John tells us how at the end of verse four, or beginning in verse four.

[He] rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. 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.⁴

Now none of this, you may imagine, was customary for the Lord of a dinner party. The Lord did not stand at the dinner party, he reclined in noble luxury. He did not strip down to his undergarments, but wore some robes of beauty and majesty fitting for his estate in life. The Lord did not pour the water or hold the towel. He certainly did not wash anyone’s feet.

And if you know the stories of the gospel you know that if anyone deserved to have his feet washed, it was Jesus himself, the way that the sinful woman washed his feet with her tears at Simon’s house or the way Mary of Bethany anointed his feet with perfume. This is what Jesus deserved.

And yet here he is taking everything that anyone expect and turning it absolutely upside down. The Lord became the servant.

Now Peter watched all of this happen. He saw Jesus working his way around the dinner table, washing the feet of one disciple and then the next and finally coming around to his turn to be washed and yet Peter questioned what the Lord was doing. You see his question in verse six.

“Lord, do you wash my feet?”⁵

³ John 13:3.

⁴ John 13:4-5.

⁵ John 13:6.

Or, to paraphrase, “You are not going to wash my feet, are you?”

Jesus gave Peter the hint that although he didn’t really understand what he was doing now, eventually it would all make sense.

But Peter wouldn’t stand for it. He comes back at Jesus in verse eight.

“You shall never wash my feet.”⁶

Typical Peter, speaking his mind, but also betraying the pride of an arrogant heart.

He was rude to Jesus telling him what to do. In his arrogance he was too proud to let Jesus serve him. Really, he was boasting that he was too clean to need any cleansing.

And this really is the first issue that has to be resolved if we are ever to offer any humble service. It is recognizing our position before God as someone who needs to be cleansed.

Really, Peter in his words and in his actions is doing everything that love is not. I like the way that James Boice explains his attitude here. Peter was humble enough to feel the incongruity of having his feet washed by Jesus, but not humble enough to refrain from telling his master what not to do.

In response, Jesus explained to Peter that he was acting out a parable of salvation.

Jesus said, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.”⁷ That’s in verse eight.

And here Jesus is no longer speaking in literal terms. He is speaking about every disciple’s need for cleansing from sin. It is true for Peter. It is true for all of us. We must be washed clean from sin.

And deep down Peter knew that he was a sinner. In fact, this had been the reason, the very reason he came to Jesus in the first place. And so with typical bravado he says, “Lord, not just feet only, but also my hands and my head.”⁸

As far as Peter was concerned, if it was worth doing, it was worth over doing. In a moment before he had refused to let Jesus even touch his feet. Now he wants to be washed from head to toe and yet he still didn’t have it right and Jesus lovingly told him that.

“The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean.”⁹

⁶ John 13:8.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ John 13:9.

⁹ John 13:10.

Now to understand this, it helps to know the customs of Bible times. When a guest was invited to dinner typically he would take a bath and then take a change of clothes and then put on his sandals and then walk to the dinner place. And by the time he arrived he really didn't need a bath all over again, but his feet were dirty from the dusty trail. And so the first thing that good host would do would be to wash the feet of his guests or at least have his servants do so.

Jesus was taking that custom and actually using that custom to make a profound spiritual point. When he said that Peter was clean, that he did not need another bath, he was really saying that Peter was already justified before God, that he was righteous in God's sight by faith. That didn't mean that Peter would never sin again. No, Peter would sin again as we all do and when he did he would need a fresh cleansing, not from head to toe. His righteousness was complete by faith. But he would need to experience cleansing in whatever area of life he was still stepping into sin.

Dr. Boice explained it like this. "Peter is a justified person and therefore needs only cleansing from the contaminating effects of sin and not pardon from sin's penalty."

Well, as we see the way that Jesus interacted with Peter and dealt with all of his questions and misunderstandings, what we really see is how much love Jesus had for this disciple and really how much love he has for us.

Peter misunderstood, but Jesus patiently explained what he was doing and why he was doing it. Peter told Jesus to stop doing it, but rather than getting irritated Jesus kept on serving. Peter misunderstood a second time in virtually the opposite direction of the way that he had first understood and yet Jesus still lovingly, kindly assures him of his salvation.

Really you see Jesus doing everything that we have been saying love does. He is patient and kind. He is not irritable. And when we see him kneel down to wash Peter's feet, we see that his love is not arrogant or boastful or rude. It is generous. It is humble. It is love on its knees, the very love that soon would stretch out its arms to offer its life for our sins. Soon Jesus really would show the full extent of his love by dying on the cross.

But the quality of that love in its humility and serve was already on full display when Jesus put a towel around his waist and filled basin with water and started to do the work that was only the work of a slave.

And do you understand? Have you experienced in your own life that Jesus has this love for you? And for all the things that you misunderstand, Jesus comes to you again and again in his Word patiently explaining his grace and does not get angry about our repeated mistakes and walk away in anger, but comes to us in love, kindly correcting us, patiently explaining again the way of salvation, graciously cleansing us from each and every sin, humbly serving all of the needs that we have in life.

And having shown us all of this grace, Jesus now calls us to show the same quality of love to others. Is it not right that he would do so having loved us in this way? Is it not right for him to send us out with this kind of love?

You see, by washing the feet of his disciples Jesus was setting a deliberate example. He was showing us how to love. And afterwards when Jesus put on his robes and sat back down at dinner with his disciples, he said this. Notice this in verse 12.

“Do you understand what I have done to you?”¹⁰

Well, Jesus didn't want to assume that they did and so he explained it to them.

You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. 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.¹¹

And you see what the argument is here. It is an argument from the greater to the lesser. Jesus is the Lord. Peter and the other disciples have called him that and rightly so. He is the Lord God of heaven and earth. Nevertheless, in spite of that high and majestic position, well, maybe I should say because of that high and majestic position, he chooses to take the lowest place.

Here is infinite condescension, the greatest possible condescension you could imagine. The Son of God and the Lord of the universe kneeling to serve as preparation for the time when he would stoop to save.

If Jesus has done this for us, we should do the same for others. That is the logical conclusion, the practical conclusion to everything that Jesus did and said in this story.

Here is how Jesus clinched his argument, verse 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. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.¹²

And here Jesus brings things to a very practical conclusion. We see the point. We are not greater than Jesus is. In fact, we are much less. He is divine. We are human. He is infinite. We are finite. He is sinless and we are sinful. The contrast could not be more complete. And, therefore, it is even more fitting for us to take the lowest place.

If we follow foot washing Savior, then no act of service could ever be beneath our dignity. But now it is not enough simply to know these things. The blessing comes to

¹⁰ John 13:12.

¹¹ John 13:13-15.

¹² John 13:16-17.

those who do them, who set aside arrogance, who dedicate their lives to loving service and then receive the blessing that Jesus has promised to give.

Now some have thought that this story from the gospel institutes foot washing as a sacrament of the Christian Church, but I think that is much too limiting. What it really is, is a call to a whole lifestyle of humble service. And Jesus was not handing us a towel and a basin necessarily, but inviting us to take up all the tools of service wherever we find them.

To come under the lordship of Jesus Christ is to follow the example of his servanthood. We will never do this if we are full of envy because then we are only thinking about what we can get, not what we can give. The envious person wants to bring other people to their needs.

We will never get to this point of service if we are boastful and arrogant because then we will expect other people to get down on their own knee, on their knees and serving us rather than the other way around. No, we will only get down on our knees to serve if we are humble enough to go to the cross and confess our sins and then ask the Holy Spirit for the grace to love the way that Jesus loved.

Are you taking up the tools of a servant's trade?

One of the tools we should keep in mind is our words, because Paul has been speaking to us about boasting, primarily a sin of speech. Here is an area where we can show our love, not monopolizing the conversation and calling attention to ourselves, but using what we say to encourage and edify others to turn attention to them and to their interests and ultimately to the grace of God.

For most of us that will probably mean less talking and more listening. Rather than saying rude and boastful things like, "Look at me," or "I can't believe they gave that award to her," say humbler things like, "I am so happy you received that promotion. I admire your gifts and the way that you use them."

And then serve not just with your words, but also with your hands the way that Jesus did. Some of us are called to do that at home. The tools of our trade are the dishrag and the laundry basket. Some of us do it in the church kitchen, the pots and pans that are used to make meals for the homeless or for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Some of us use our hands in diaconal work, some of the practical things surrounding the worship service and taking a meal to someone who is shut in at home and needs some help. Others serve by pushing wheel chairs or playing musical instruments for the worship service at the nursing home or all the things we can do with our hands to help children, building an orphanage, wrapping a child up with the arms of love, taking a stethoscope and putting it on the chest of a little boy or a little girl who does not have medical care otherwise. These are some of the many ways that people in this very congregation serve.

If you want to know how to serve, there are opportunities in the bulletin every week. There are millions of ways to practice humble service. The issue is not a lack of opportunities, the issue is always a lack of willingness. It is never a matter of ability, but only a matter of the heart.

I wonder. What is the place in your life where your service shows the humility of your Savior? Look for every opportunity to serve. Take the lower place, not the higher place. Do not think of service as a job for someone else, but as a calling for you, because otherwise you really are claiming to be greater than your master and I know you don't want to do that.

No, follow the example of Jesus. Keep in mind the picture of his service. See Jesus with the towel around his waist and a basin of water in his hands and his love on his knees. Take the tools of the servant's trade.

Our Father, we pray that you would give us the grace to do that, that you would work into our lives a more complete humility, a more complete love which is like the love of Jesus and which serves others in something like the way that he has served us for his sake and for his name. Amen.