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The Sacrifice of Service

Moses is described in the Bible as “the servant of God” (1 Chronicles 6:49; 2 Chronicles 24:9; Daniel 9:11; Revelation 15:3). The same is true of Paul (Titus 1:1) and James (James 1:1). In fact, “servant of God” is how God would have us interact with this world.

2 Corinthians 6:4a, “In everything commending ourselves as servants of God...”

Where did such an idea come from? Clearly from the Lord. As THE Servant of God (~Is. 49),

listen to what Christ told His disciples,

John 13:12-15, “And so when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments, and reclined *at the table* again, [Jesus] said to them, ‘Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for *so* I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.’”

As that is the case, what do you suppose is the essence of any and all leadership in the body of Christ? It too is the work of a servant!

Mark 10:42-45, “And calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, ‘You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. [Why is that?] For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.’”

Next week we will be ordaining and installing officers to serve this body. In anticipation of this, consider the calling that rests upon all of our lives — The Calling of Service! More than anything this ought to be that which characterizes our interaction with each other and the world. But as I just mentioned, it also must characterize the work of the elder or deacon!

Accordingly, let’s consider the sacrifice of service as it is detailed for us in John 13:1-5, a passage describing the work of our Lord when He washed the disciple’s feet. We begin with the setting from God’s perspective, it is a celebration of purity.

John 13:1a, “Now before the Feast of the Passover...”¹

The Jewish calendar was filled with many religious celebrations — a majority of which involved feasts. Accordingly, we read of the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) which occurred in May/June, the Feast of Booths which occurred in Sept/Oct, the Feast of Dedication (Nov/Dec) and so on.² Yet of all the feasts, the Feast of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (the celebrations were held back to back) were the central feasts of the Jewish year. Combined these two feasts made an eight-day celebration which focused on the grace of God by which He withheld His wrath on account of our sin (Passover) with the subsequent calling to rid ourselves of any and all sin (which is what the Feast of Unleavened Bread was all about). It was in this context that the event referenced in John 13 took place! It therefore is with great irony that we read that from Satan’s perspective this was a celebration of evil.

John 13:2, “And during supper, the devil having already put into the heart [lit., ‘thrown into the heart’] of Judas Iscariot, *the son* of Simon, to betray Him.”

Talk about a dark contrast against the backdrop of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened

Bread! When Christ washed the disciples' feet, Judas was present! Yet far from striving to be freed of sin, Judas was at that moment fully immersed in it! Two times we read of Satan filling Judas:

- (1) Just before he arranged Christ's betrayal and then
- (2) When he was about to carry it out his traitorous plans

Both sandwiched Christ's washing of the disciples' feet (cf. Luke 22:3; John 13:27)!³ This no doubt is why John 13:11 speaks of Judas as in the act of betraying Christ!

This meant that this act of service on the part of Christ — which is the model for our service — was performed NOT ONLY in the presence of a wicked man, BUT also for that wicked man (who had, tucked away at that moment, thirty pieces of silver as payment for his betrayal of Christ⁴)! D. A. Carson comments on this passage speaking of Christ:

With such power and status at his disposal, we might have expected him to defeat the devil in an immediate and flashy confrontation, and to devastate Judas with an unstoppable blast of divine wrath. Instead, he washes his disciples' feet, including the feet of the betrayer. (Carson, 1990, p. 462)

Don't miss therefore the incredible significance of this act! Jesus met the greatest injury and insult imaginable with humble, loving service! Truly, sandwiched between Judas' treachery was the grace of God!

So, we have before us a setting which couldn't be fraught with a greater contrast. On the one hand it was a time when God's people celebrated sin's forgiven and so responded with a diligent ridding of their homes of the leaven of sin. On the other hand, it was a time when sin was having its most destructive impact in the life of a sinner, namely Judas — who was NOT fighting against it, BUT giving himself to it! And yet, there is more! The treachery of this moment was deepened on account of what the disciples were doing when Christ "rose from the supper" (v. 4).

For this we see that from the disciple's perspective it was a celebration of folly.

Luke 22:24, "And there arose also a dispute among them *as to* which one of them was regarded to be greatest."

Why do you suppose the disciples were arguing at this moment about that?

There was a familial rule in Judaism that governed most meals, specifically that the lowest ranking individual (socially) was to wash the feet of those present.⁵ The practice wasn't always followed in day to day living (as at regular times, people washed their own feet before they reclined at the dinner table). However, during times of special occasions, the practice was observed — as at a Passover meal. But here is the difficulty behind it: the practice was quite degrading as it involved

- (1) Touching that which was associated with sin (the feet) and so
- (2) The public acceptance that you were the lowest individual present.

Normally such a task was assigned to the lowest Gentile servant present. Where there were no servants, the task devolved upon the youngest daughter. If there were no girls in a family, then the task would be performed by the lowest prepubescent, yet able boy. And if there was not a boy present, then it fell upon the wife. And if a gathering were void of all of these people, the duty fell upon the lowest adult male (socially)!

Now in the context of the disciples, who do you suppose that would have been? That is the question which fueled the argument recorded in Luke 22! William Hendriksen describes it this way:

Jesus waited a long time. The disciples had already occupied their places around the U-shaped table. The food was on the table, and the meal was about to begin. Still no one offered to perform the duty of the servant. The water-pitcher, the wash-basin, and the apron-towel, placed there in the plain sight of all, frowned upon them. These utensils constituted a silent accusation against these men! Still no one moved. (Hendrikson, 1959, p. 229)

It was in this context that Christ rose from the table, laid aside His garments, girded His loins with a towel, and then humbled himself to the position of a slave.⁶ This is the context of the service to which each of us in Christ have been called! Do you understand what this means?

- If the God of creation was willing to wash the feet of a group of sinners arguing in His presence concerning who among them was the greatest
- If Christ was willing to wash the feet and so serve the most wicked man this world has ever seen...

What possibly could prevent you from humbling yourself and serving the sinners in the Jerusalem in which you live? The obvious answer is, “Nothing!” Leon Morris put it this way:

It is a parable in action, setting out that great principle of lowly service which brings cleansing and which finds its supreme embodiment in the cross, setting out also the necessity for the disciple to take the Lord’s way, not his own. (Morris, 1971, p. 544)

From this you must see: Christianity is a service religion because God is a serving Lord (cf. Jeremiah 22:16)!⁷ As that is the case, you must see that the context in which we serve ought to have NO impact upon our service! It doesn’t matter the individual in your home, family, marriage, places of work, or ministry! “We love because God first loved us” (1 John 4:19). And so, we serve because Christ first served us! Richard Phillips wrote again:

If Jesus, with his soul filled with the consciousness of deity, took up the place of the most

menial servanthood to wash his disciples' feet, then any authentic display of God must be characterized by humility, tenderness, and sacrificial love. And if this is the truth about the God that we are called to glorify in the world, how we ought especially to take up the towel of Jesus in our marriages, in our home life, and in our fellowship in the church!... To do this, just as Jesus took off his garments, we must take off all our pride, all our envy, and everything else that hinders us from taking up the basin to wash the feet of others. (Phillips, 2014, p. 146)

In this regard, hear me well... when it comes to ministry there will be few, over the long haul, whom you will deem worthy of the sacrifice you are called to make on their behalf. We are sinners ministering to sinners... that means ministry will NOT be easy! It will demand much from you!

So how do we do it? How do you serve an individual who in your estimate is nowhere close to being worthy? Well, how did Christ do it? The answer is found in the conviction to serve.

Three times in this passage we are informed as to what Jesus "knew"⁸, which gives us the thought process that drove our Lord in His service here. Accordingly, what was it that enabled Him as a man to be so self-less, so willing to put the sinner before Himself? It began with a knowledge and so the conviction of the sovereignty of God's timing.

John 13:1, "Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus KNOWING that His hour had come that He should depart out of this world to the Father..."

Throughout His ministry, Christ was mindful that all that was occurring was according to a plan that was conceived in eternity. Listen to Paul's instruction to the Ephesians.

Ephesians 1:3-5, "Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will."

Before the world began, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit entered into an agreement to save a sinful people. Accordingly, the moment Christ was born, as God, He knew that everything in His 33-year life was fixed! Paul speaking of God's redeeming grace we read this:

Ephesians 3:10-11, "In order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly *places*. *This was* in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord."

As Christ was ever mindful that all that He did was according to a plan set in motion in eternity past, He frequently told those in His presence, "My hour has not yet come" (cf. John 2:4; 7:6, 8,

30; 8:20). Yet during the events of the passage before us, Christ knew that a plan that had been conceived in eternity was at that moment coming to pass. The time truly had come for Him “to depart out of this world to the Father”! Accordingly, He knew that:

- He was about to be arrested, brought before the religious leaders of His day, tried, mocked, and beaten. He soon would be hung on a tree. There He would die, be buried, and then rise victorious on the third day.
- And then, after spending forty days ministering to His disciples (cf. Acts 1:3), He would ascend into glory.

Now get this: all of this was according to the plan of Almighty God!

John 12:27, “Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? But for this purpose I came to this hour.”

Truly, nothing in His life was by accident. Everything was according to God’s perfect timing, will, plan, and purpose.

Galatians 4:4, “But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law.”

Christ’s coming was in accordance with God’s perfect time and will! Unlike Paul, His was NOT an “untimely birth” (1 Corinthians 15:8)! And so NOT ONLY did Christ come at the perfect time in accord with God’s perfect plan, BUT Peter declares this about Christ:

1 Peter 1:20a, “...foreknown before the foundation of the world...”

That means everything Christ said and did in His first advent was according to God’s eternal plan- ALL OF IT! In fact, speaking of His death John says this about Christ:

Revelation 13:8, “...the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.” (NKJV)

Accordingly, Christ ministered ever mindful that a good God sovereignly ruled over this earth and therefore where our Lord was and what He was doing was according to God’s divine plan! And so it was at this Passover meal!

Christian, it is with this conviction we too must carry out our call of service! That means there is NO SUCH THING as bad timing or an accident. Where you are and what you are doing it is right where God wants you to be. This conviction gives so much strength to us as servants. Consider how Peter and John encouraged the disciples after Peter and John were arrested, beaten, and threatened so that they would not continue to preach Christ; they prayed this way:

Acts 4:24b-28, “O Lord, it is Thou who didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them, who by the Holy Spirit, *through* the mouth of our father David Thy

servant, didst say, ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples devise futile things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against His Christ.’ For truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur.”

These men were NOT surprised by the persecution or the threats they had received... NOR were they intimidated! For they knew that nothing could occur in their lives and ministries that God had not ordained! It was with this conviction that they served the Lord unto death!

So Christian:

- (1) You don't like your circumstances? I can't imagine Christ, as a man, did!
- (2) You don't want to humble yourself before another? I can't imagine Christ, as a man, did!

Yet knowing that where He was and that what He was called to do was in accord with God's eternal plan, Christ was strengthened and enabled to pour Himself out for the Lord and His people!

References

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End Note(s)

¹ “An apparent discrepancy exists at this point between John's chronology and that of the Synoptic Gospels. The latter clearly state that the Last Supper was a Passover meal (Matt. 26:17–19; Mark 14:12–16; Luke 22:7–15). John 18:28, however, records that the Jewish leaders “led Jesus from Caiaphas into the Praetorium, and it was early [Friday morning; the day of the crucifixion]; and they themselves did not enter into the Praetorium so that they would not be defiled, but might eat the Passover.” Further, according to John 19:14 Jesus' trial and crucifixion took place on “the day of preparation for the Passover,” not the day after the eating of the Passover meal. Thus the Lord was crucified at the same time that the Passover lambs were being killed (cf. 19:36; Ex. 12:46; Num. 9:12). The challenge, then, is to explain how Jesus and the disciples could have eaten the Passover meal on Thursday evening if the

Jewish leaders had not yet eaten it on Friday morning. ¶ The answer lies in understanding that the Jews had two different methods of reckoning days. Ancient Jewish sources suggest that Jews from the northern part of Israel (including Galilee, where Jesus and most of the Twelve were from) counted days from sunrise to sunrise. Most of the Pharisees apparently also used that method. On the other hand, the Jews in the southern region of Israel counted days from sunset to sunset. That would include the Sadducees (who of necessity lived in the vicinity of Jerusalem because of their connection with the temple). Though no doubt confusing at times, that dual method of reckoning days would have had practical benefits at Passover, allowing the feast to be celebrated on two consecutive days. That would have eased the crowded conditions in Jerusalem, especially in the temple, where all the lambs would not have had to be killed on the same day. ¶ Thus, there is no contradiction between John and the Synoptics. Being Galileans, Jesus and the Twelve would have viewed Passover day as running from sunrise on Thursday to sunrise on Friday. They would have eaten their Passover meal on Thursday evening. The Jewish leaders (the Sadducees), however, would have viewed it as beginning at sunset on Thursday and ending at sunset on Friday. They would have eaten their Passover meal on Friday evening. (For a further discussion of this issue, see Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977], 74–90; Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, *A Harmony of the Gospels* [Chicago: Moody, 1979], 321–22).” (MacArthur, 2008, pp. 62-63)

² For example: (1) The feast of Pentecost/Weeks, commemorated God’s provision (see Ex. 23:16)- typically in May/June. It was this feast which the Jews were celebrating when the HS “came upon believers” (Acts 2). (2) The feast of Tabernacles, or Booths, commemorated Israel’s wandering in the wilderness for forty years where they lived in tents/booths- typically held around Sept/Oct (Lev. 23:33–43). (3) The Day of Atonement occurred in Sept/Oct in which a once-a-year sacrifice was offered for sins in the Holy of Holies by the high priest (Lev. 23:27–32). (4) The feast of Purim celebrated the protection from slaughter of the Jewish exiles in Persia through the intervention of Queen Esther (Esther 9:16–19). This was held somewhere around Feb/Mar. (5) The feast of Dedication, or Hanukkah, commemorated the victory of Judas Maccabeus over the Syrians and the restoration of Temple worship- typically around Nov/Dec (see 1 Macc. 4:36–61).

³ John MacArthur wrote, “Judas was unmoved by the Lord’s manifestation of love for him; the same act that drew the other disciples to Christ repelled him. ¶ Judas’s greed and ambition had long since opened the door to the Devil’s influence (cf. 12:4–6). Although Satan inspired his betrayal of Jesus Christ, Judas was fully responsible for his heinous act. His own evil heart desired the same thing Satan did—Jesus’ death. Satan and Judas were in complete accord; they were coconspirators in the plot to kill Jesus Christ. Soon, Judas would be under Satan’s complete control (v. 27) and would carry out his plan to betray the Son of God (v. 30; cf. Matt. 26:24).” (MacArthur, 2008, p. 64)

⁴ Mt. 26:15.

⁵ Think of Luke 7:44 and that time when Christ dined with a Pharisee who was NOT willing to wash Christ’s feet.

⁶ John MacArthur observed, “Having walked through the dirt streets of Jerusalem to the upper room, the disciples’ feet, protected only by sandals, would naturally have been dirty, and while they were reclining for a long meal, offensive. Since there was no servant there to do it, one of the Twelve should have volunteered to wash the feet of the others. But the Lord’s admonition, “The greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matt. 23:11) had fallen on deaf ears. Instead of humbling themselves, the disciples were continuing their ongoing debate over which of them was the greatest (Luke 22:24; cf. Mark 9:34), and angling for the prominent positions in the kingdom (Matt. 20:20–24). That being the case, the last thing any of them did was to perform the task of the lowest slave (though they no doubt would have been happy to wash the Lord’s feet).” (MacArthur, 2008, pp. 65-66)

⁷ From this I want you to see that the nature of the One whom we ultimately serve- God- demands that His mind, His passion, His way become our mind, passion, and way. In Phil. 2:5-7a, Paul wrote, “Have this [mind] in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant...” From this you must see that the servant heart is not simply what Christ assumed in His humiliation, it is what He was prior to His incarnation! Richard Phillips wrote “By this one act, Jesus challenges our understanding of the glory of God. Later that very evening, he would tell the disciples, ‘Whoever has seen me has seen the Father’ (John 14:9). The God that Jesus reveals is tender, compassionate, and servant-hearted toward the needs of his people.” (John, REC, p. 146) And so we read, speaking of God, “‘He pled the cause of the afflicted and needy; then it was well. Is not that

what it means to know Me?’ declares the Lord.” (Jeremiah 22:16)

⁸ Leon Morris wrote, “Again John stresses Jesus’ command of the situation. He knew what was taking place (see on 2:24; 4:18).” (Morris, 1971, p. 546)