

Jesus Models Servant Leadership (John 13:1-20)

Servant leadership isn't a new concept even though it's become a recognized practice within the secular world. Servant leadership actually flows from the heart of God. Servant leadership is at the core of Christian practice. Jesus modeled servant leadership. When Jesus washed His disciples' feet He revealed the heart of a servant, giving us an example to follow. As followers of Jesus we lead best by serving others. Like Jesus, ours must be the way of a servant.

A servant heart begins with a settled awareness of our position in God's program (13:1-3).

Jesus could serve others because He understood His own identity and He was secure in His unchangeable relationship with God the Father. Jesus also knew His redemptive role. Therefore, Jesus could freely serve others.

Jesus knew that the time of His death was near (13:1).

It was the season of Passover. At Passover families offered a sacrificial lamb and ate together in remembrance of God's redemptive work in bringing them out of Egyptian slavery. Jesus knew that this was the precise time for Him to give His life for the sins of the world. He is our sacrificial lamb, the Lamb of God. His hour had come. That hour would include His death on the cross, His resurrection from the dead, and His return to the Father in heaven. John states that Jesus loved His own, that is, His disciples. Of course, Jesus loved the whole world. But He held a special place in His heart for those who had followed Him throughout His earthly ministry. This love for His disciples was full and complete—He “loved them to the end.”

Jesus knew that He would soon be betrayed (13:2).

Jesus and His disciples had gathered to share what would become known as the Last Supper. Among those reclining with Jesus was Judas Iscariot, the betrayer. John states that the devil had already planted betrayal into the heart of Judas. Satan prompted Judas to turn against his Master and Judas was complicit in this hideous act. Jesus knew that His betrayer was present at the table when He washed His disciples' feet.

Jesus knew that God the Father had granted Him authority (13:3).

God the Father sent God the Son into the world to redeem fallen people. The Father had placed “all things” in the hands of Jesus. Jesus would perfectly fulfill His redemptive role. Jesus knew His mission, He knew that He had come from the Father in heaven to accomplish that mission, and He knew that He would return to the Father upon the completion of that mission. Jesus was secure in His identity and purpose. Therefore, He could humbly serve His disciples by washing their feet. We, too, need to have a clear understanding of our relationship with God as redeemed sons and daughters and to recognize our mission as those sent into the world with the

good news of Jesus Christ. Only then will we be effective servants, servant leaders in a spiritually misguided world.

**A servant heart demonstrates itself
through humble acts of kindness (13:4-5).**

Jesus did that which seemed unthinkable. He took on the role of a servant, a common household slave, and He washed His disciples' feet.

Jesus took on the role of a servant in the presence of His disciples (13:4).

It was the custom in ancient times for a dinner host to provide a servant who would wash the feet of the guests. Because people walked dusty roads, shod in sandals, their feet routinely became dirty. To eat with dirty feet would have been uncomfortable and unpleasant. Foot washing was a common practice, but one that was carried out by servants. As the meal began, Jesus took off His outer garment and wrapped a towel around His waist, preparing to carry out the work of a servant.

Jesus humbly washed the feet of each of His disciples (13:5).

Jesus then filled a basin with water and began to wash His disciples' feet. In those days people reclined around a low table, their feet extending outward—readily accessible for washing. Jesus went to each of His disciples, one by one, and poured water on their feet. He then dried their feet with the towel. This act of humility must have been shocking to Jesus' disciples. After all, only servants washed others' feet. Obviously none of the disciples had taken this task on themselves. They were too concerned about their own status to stoop to such an act (Luke 22:24-27). But Jesus modeled servant leadership. Twelve disciples, twenty-four feet, two hundred forty toes were washed and dried by the Creator of the universe! Servants engage in humble acts of kindness toward others, and we must remember that we are servants of our Lord.

**A servant heart discerns
the true needs of others (13:6-11).**

By the time Jesus reached Peter, this outspoken disciple had determined that it was not his Master's responsibility to wash their feet. But Jesus revealed to Peter a greater need than clean feet. We need clean hearts.

Peter resisted Jesus' attempt to wash his feet (13:6-8a).

When Jesus came to Peter, Peter questioned Him. "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" This question obviously revealed Peter's resistance to such an act on the part of his Lord. Jesus stated that Peter didn't yet understand the significance of this act but would eventually learn the lesson that Jesus was teaching him. Peter then refused to let Jesus wash his feet,

saying, “You will never wash my feet.” In spite of Peter’s resistance, Jesus knew the deeper needs of Peter’s heart. There were still great spiritual lessons for Peter to learn.

Jesus told Peter that cleansing is necessary in order to maintain fellowship (13:8b-11).

Jesus told Peter, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.” To have a “part with” Jesus refers to fellowship with Him. Having entered into a relationship with Jesus through faith we need to maintain fellowship with Jesus by abiding in Him (John 15:9-10). Would Peter refuse fellowship with Jesus? No, Peter did that which came naturally to him. He insisted on receiving not just foot washing, but an entire bath! He said, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and head.” We have to admire Peter’s enthusiasm for his Lord!

Jesus reassured Peter that those who have already been bathed need nothing more than periodic foot washing. The bath provided a thorough cleansing already. We can detect a distinction in Jesus’ words between the cleansing of regeneration and the cleansing of confession. When we put our faith in Jesus we are thoroughly bathed—our sins are washed away and we are reborn into God’s family (Titus 3:5). Having been saved by God’s grace, we now need only to deal with our momentary sins through confession that restores us to fellowship with God (1 John 1:9). Jesus assured Peter that he was clean and so needed only to have his feet washed. Jesus then, addressing the disciples as a group, declared, “You are clean.” These men had put their faith in Jesus and were clean in God’s sight. However, Jesus added, “But not all of you.” He knew that one man reclining at that table, one man whose feet Jesus had washed, had never been bathed by faith and was about to betray Him. Jesus knows that our true need is for regeneration. Only by becoming a part of God’s family through faith in Jesus can we then enjoy lasting, eternal fellowship with Him. We can maintain that fellowship through confession, the periodic washing of our hearts.

**A servant heart reflects
the actions and attitudes of Jesus (13:12-17).**

Jesus would now verbalize what He had visualized for His disciples by washing their feet. Jesus set an example for us to follow.

Jesus reminded the disciples that He was their Teacher and Lord (13:12-13).

Was Jesus a servant or was He the Master? After washing His disciples’ feet like a mere servant, Jesus put on His outer garment again and took His place at the table. He then asked His disciples a penetrating question. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” He then reminded them that He was, by their own admission, their Teacher and their Master (Lord). He was definitely their leader, but Jesus was a servant leader.

Jesus instructed the disciples to follow His example of serving others (13:14-15).

Jesus was both Teacher and Master to His disciples, but He had also washed their feet. Therefore, He told His disciples that they should follow His example. They were to wash one

another's feet. Rather than argue among themselves who was greatest, they should serve one another in humility. This is the way of Jesus. This is the way of Jesus' true followers. Jesus described His act of foot washing as an "example" for His disciples to follow. Rather than establishing an ordinance to be observed ritually, Jesus was demonstrating a way of life (compare 1 Timothy 5:10). As Jesus' followers we are to engage in acts of humble service toward others, especially toward fellow believers ("one another"). To elevate ourselves above others is to deny the way Jesus modeled by washing His disciples' feet. Servant acts must flow from servant hearts. Being a servant leader cannot involve mere actions. Our actions must reflect our innermost attitude, an attitude of humility like that of Jesus (Philippians 2:5-8).

Those who follow Jesus' example will experience His blessing (13:16-17).

Jesus then pronounced a blessing on those who follow His way, the way of a servant. Emphasizing the importance of His lesson with the words "truly, truly," Jesus said that a servant is not greater than his or her master. Someone who is sent on a mission is not greater than the one who does the sending. Jesus is our Master, and we are His servants. Jesus has sent us to bear witness to Him in this world and we are His messengers. If we bear in mind that we are but servants and messengers of our Lord, we are "blessed" in this realization when that realization is coupled with action. A servant heart reflects the actions and attitudes of our Lord.

A servant heart extends help to friends and enemies alike (13:18-20).

Becoming a servant leader like Jesus includes serving not only one another but even our enemies. Indeed, Jesus modeled this kind of servant leadership.

Jesus indicated that one of the disciples would soon betray Him (13:18-19).

Jesus' declared blessing on His disciples didn't include one of the men reclining at the table that night. Jesus stated that He knew those whom He had chosen as His followers, those who were in fellowship with Him (John 6:70). But among the twelve disciples there was a betrayer. Jesus cited Psalm 41:9 in which David declared that one who had shared his bread had lifted up his heel against David. In the same way one that was present at the table with Jesus had already arranged to betray Him. Judas' actions would fulfill this scriptural prediction. Jesus raised this issue at this point in the meal in order to warn His disciples in advance and to reassure them that He is who He claimed to be. He didn't want them to lose faith. Instead, He wanted them to believe, as He said, that "I am," that He is the self-revealed God, God in the flesh (compare John 8:24, 28 and Exodus 3:14). Even though He would be betrayed, arrested, and crucified Jesus was still the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of God.

Jesus stated that anyone who accepts His people accepts Him (13:20).

Again Jesus emphasized His lesson with the words "truly, truly." He stated that anyone who receives those He sends receives Him as well. Likewise, those who receive Jesus receive the one who sent Him. In other words, the Father sent Jesus into the world and those who

receive Jesus by faith also receive the Father. Jesus now sends His followers into the world, and those who receive His followers and their message receive Jesus—and thereby the Father as well. As Jesus' followers, we're to serve others and share the good news in Jesus' name. As spiritual servant leaders we have a significant role to play in a spiritually needy world. As followers of Jesus we lead best by serving others. Like Jesus, ours must be the way of a servant.