Altavista Presbyterian Church
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"Christ's Commandment"

John 13:1-17, 31-35

Maundy Thursday
April 13, 2017

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Now before the Feast of the Passover, 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. During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, 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, 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. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you." For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean."

When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? 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. 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."

[After Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.' A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

"Christ's Commandment"

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord stands forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

What a powerful, moving, and challenging example from our Lord. John the Evangelist presents to us an unique occurrence in the ministry of Jesus Christ. No other Gospel records the event of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. At the start of his commentary on this very passage, John Calvin remarks concerning the footwashing: "The Lord testified, by this visible sign, that the love with which he embraced them was firm and lasting; that, though they were deprived of his presence, they might still be convinced that death itself would not quench this love."[1] The Apostle Paul was right to teach the Romans "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

[1] John Calvin, *Commentary on John* vol. 2, page 41. http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom35.html

Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?"[2] To this the Apostle answers, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."[3] Christ's love for us is the perfect example of servant leadership. Servant leadership is here modeled for us in clear analogy, but it should come as no surprise to see that style of leadership in all of Jesus' interactions.

To be honest, though, servant leadership is hard. It's much easier to take charge and command things to be done. I personally struggle with this. My leadership predisposition is the one that says, "If you want it done right, you've got to do it yourself." I bet some of you share that same proclivity. Others of you may be more dictatorial: "You're going to get this job done this way or else!" Others may be more free-spirited: As long as the project is completed and done more or less on time, then you're okay. All three of these have their pros and cons in the corporate world. But none of them is servant leadership. True servant leadership has at its heart love. And not just any love, but a love that instills humility and selflessness.

What does it mean to love with humility and selflessness? Well, Jesus provides for us another example. The Evangelist makes a point to draw our attention to one of the disciples. Right in verse two, John names Judas Iscariot as present and accounted for at the table. In fact, Judas doesn't leave the room until verse thirty. Do you hear what's going on? Jesus knew what Judas was going to do, the Holy Spirit already revealed it to him. And Calvin calls Judas a "wicked and detestable traitor."[4] Yet, even with the knowledge of Judas' treachery, our Lord still lowered himself in humility and selfless love to wash this traitor's feet.

Think about that for a moment. If you knew someone was going to betray you, turn you into the authorities under false charges, would you be able to perform some selfless act on their behalf? I can confidently say I would have a really hard time doing that. Christ allowed the wicked plot against him to continue because he knew his Father's plan. I can only speak for myself, and I am no Jesus Christ, but I think that was really hard to do. But you know what? There's something inspiring in that, too. The type of love that Christ models for us and commands of us is also a fearless love. Servant leadership isn't just about being humble, it's also about having courage when it comes to doing the commands of God. I want to unpack this a little more by talking about another command of Christ.

The other three Gospels record what I like to call the Double-Love Rule. The religious authorities of the time asked Jesus what is the greatest commandment. Well, Jesus does one better and gives them a two-fold answer. He says the greatest commandment is to love God with our whole selves—with body, mind, and spirit—and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. The greatest command ever given says we are to love God wholly and love our neighbors endlessly. You love yourself pretty endlessly, right? You might dislike something about yourself or something you may have done, but for the most part, the only person we 100% love 100% of the time is our self. Jesus is here saying that that same level of self-love should also be applied to our neighbors. But there's more than just that. Selfish love is proud and arrogant. When we are

[2] Romans 8:35
[3] Romans 8:37
[4] Calvin, 42.

selfish we seek self-preservation. Christ, here, is telling us something more than just preserving and lifting up our neighbors. Verse thirty-four, halfway through, says "just as I have loved you…" Christ's love is the model for our love; a love that is courageous and humble. God's love is the starting place for understanding this new commandment.

Look, the first half of the greatest commandment is to love God with our mind, body, spirit, and might. One might ask, "Why should I love God? What has God done for me?" That's selfishness right there. "Why should I love my neighbor? Everyone in this country is mad at each other for this opinion or that, for this belief or that, for this action or that. Why doesn't God just make us get along?" Again, that's an attitude of selfishness. Why do we love God? Well, the short answer is because He made us, He gives us life, and can easily take it away. But that's not a positive answer. That answer is more likely to turn people off to God. Why do we love God? Because God first loved us. Well, what does that mean? Truthfully, humans are hard to love. Just ask my wife. When I'm having a bad day, I'm hard to love. I know this about myself. I'm sure some of you know what I'm talking about. And I like to think I'm not the worst person out there. I feel there are more unlovable people than me in the world. Or maybe that's the selfish speaking. Nevertheless, I do believe we humans are hard to love. Just look on TV or Facebook. I'm not feeling much love coming from Washington. Social media, I think, is worse than Capitol Hill. There are so many hurtful, hateful comments being thrown around on Facebook and Twitter. How in the world can God love such a race as ours?

It is no mystery that God does love us. When God created Adam and Eve, on that final day of Creation, God remarked, "Behold, it is very good." We have always been God's special creation. God loves the whole world and all that is in it, and we are called to be stewards of this planet, but we are God's special creation, created in His image. When you read the Old Testament you find countless stories of how the Israelites disobeyed God. They worshiped idols, they sought after riches, they forgot their neighbors, and they ignored the commandments. God handed down punishments, but He never once gave up on loving the Children of Israel. Whenever they learned of the error of their ways and returned to God, He welcomed them with open arms. And this happened over and over and over again. Just read the book of Judges. This endless love, steadfast love, is the very definition of divine grace. We love God with everything we are and everything we have because God first loved us. Not only did He first love us, He endlessly loves us. I know there are mothers and fathers in this world who do not love their children. But my hope and my assumption is that many of the world's parents have a deep, unending love for their children. Magnify that love so that it is perfect and ceaseless, and there you have God's love for us. We love God, because God first loved us.

Without God's loving us, we would not have the capacity to love. Like I mentioned earlier, just look out into the world or across the street, and you'll see how bad we are at loving, especially with the love of Christ. We love our own. That's true enough. One of the Scripture readings during our recent sermon series on forgiveness was Jesus' observation that loving our kindred is easy. We do it all the time. People from other religions, people with no religion, regardless, people love their own. But Jesus challenges us, his followers, to love even our enemies and to pray for them. It's hard to love with the love of Christ. But you know what we have? We have a helper. We have someone who will guide us towards a love like Christ's. The Holy Spirit, the

third person of the Trinity, is our advocate, guide, and counselor. The Spirit actively works in us to grow in us the love that Christ asks for.

In order for us to love God with our whole selves and love our neighbors as we love ourselves, we must first make room for the Holy Spirit. And how do we do that? We go back to servant leadership. We remove from ourselves selfishness, pride, and deceit. Calvin notes, "Pride hinders us from maintaining that equality which ought to exist amongst us."[5] Pride causes us to erect dividing walls of hostility. Pride blinds us by focusing our attention on ourselves, rather than on God and neighbor. And I'm not talking about being proud of your achievements, although there, too, we can go too far if we forget from whence our abilities come. No, I'm talking about the type of pride that engenders a sense of entitlement or arrogance. The feeling we are better than someone else. That type of arrogance turns us away from loving God and neighbor, and turns us toward a self-love. It is only God's Spirit who redirects us away from pride and toward humility and selflessness. The Holy Ghost plants within us the desire to love God and seek after him. We just need to have ears to hear.

Once the Holy Spirit instills within us this humility, courage, and selflessness, this servant leadership, then and only then can we truly love God first, and then naturally our neighbors. Without God's first loving us, we could never love God. And without our love of God, we could never love our neighbor, let alone our enemies. Before we can ever extend a hand in Christian charity and love, we need to have a love for God that flows from our whole self. Jesus said we must love just as he loved us. Regarding the Double-Love Rule, both our vertical relationship with God and our horizontal relationship with neighbor must exist in the Christian life, and the latter naturally proceeds from the former. It's like those old televisions where you had to adjust two knobs in order to bring the picture into focus. Some of you know what I'm talking about. Both needed to be aligned in order for you to receive the transmission. Likewise, the Double-Love Rule is cause and effect. God's first love for us causes us to love him, which in turn engenders effectual neighborly love in us and through us.

Now, before we can ever wash another's feet—that is, before we can ever love and serve others—we must first learn the why and the how of Christ's servant leadership. Two chapters later, still part of this Upper Room discourse, Jesus repeats, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." But this time he adds in 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." Wow! That's a tremendous amount of love right there. And Jesus surely fulfills this when he lays down his own life not just for the disciples, but for the whole human race. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." We all know that verse and it appears earlier in this Gospel. Calvin calls to our attention that "God might have redeemed us by a single word, or by a mere act of his will, if he had not thought it better to do otherwise for our own benefit, that, by not sparing his own well-beloved Son, he might testify in his person how much he cares for our salvation." Our hearts, comments Calvin, "if they are not softened by the inestimable sweetness of Divine love, must be harder than stone or iron."[6] Our hearts are softened only when we realize the immensity of God's love for us.

[5] Calvin, 47.
[6] Calvin, 96.

Not only does God love us, his chosen people, but he also loves all people. John Calvin, the man who speaks so loudly about predestination, says, "In this way, too, Christ laid down his life for those who were strangers, but whom, even while they were strangers, he loved, otherwise he would not have died for them."[7] If Christ is willing to die for total strangers, should that not inspire us? Should we not be moved to do likewise? What if you loved someone so much that you would be willing to die for them? You probably love your family that much, well maybe some of them. But could you love a complete stranger the same way? Could you at least try? Think how that would change you. Think about it as we close this night, the night Jesus was arrested. Think about it tomorrow as we recall Jesus' trials, punishment, execution, and burial. And then think about how much love comes from God on Easter morning; and think about how, even with a fraction of that love, lived out in servant leadership enacted with humility and courage, how we could change the world.

Let us pray. Most Holy God, on this solemn night you sent your son to die on our behalf. But before that moment in history, he gave to his disciples one final commandment. After washing their feet, and instituting Holy Communion, our Lord instructed them to love one another just as he loves them. We, too, are recipients of this mandate. So we turn to you, O God, for the help of the Holy Spirit with this weighty command. Give to us a love that brings humility into our hearts and turns us away from pride and arrogance. Give to us a love that brings courage into our being and directs us to serve boldly. Give to us a love that brings selflessness modeled after Christ's own selfless act of sacrifice. When we've received your love into our hearts, help us to extend that selfsame love to others. Show us the light of Christ's love so that we may cast his light on the darkness of this world. In grief and in gratitude, we pray. Amen.

[7] Calvin, 97.