

The Super Bowl is far and away the most-watched television event of the year in America, with about 125 million people tuning in. Because the eyes of the entire nation are focused in one place, it costs about 15 million dollars to claim a one-minute ad. Just as this year's game was starting, what did we see? A one-minute-long montage of people washing feet. It was somewhat controversial because there was a picture of a woman washing the feet of someone outside of an abortion clinic, of a man who works oil rigs washing the feet of an environmental protester, of a suburban mom washing the feet of an immigrant, and finally of a priest washing the feet of a trans individual. The commercial ended with these words: "Jesus didn't teach hate. He washed feet." There have been so many unique and passionate responses to the video. In every list I found online, it was hands down the most controversial commercial of the entire day. Some people loved it. Some people hated it. Regardless of the different perspectives, tens of millions of people, Christians and non-Christians, religious and non-religious alike, were talking about Jesus washing feet. Record numbers of people visited the "He Gets Us" website. There is something provocative, something attention-grabbing, something compelling about this picture of Jesus washing feet, that people across the planet are still talking about 2000 years later.

As we continue in our series called "In the Flesh," as we are nearing the end of Jesus' earthly life and ministry, that's the passage we are in today! We are going to see that Jesus' washing feet was just as controversial and provocative back then as it has been recently. We'll unpack the meaning behind it all, and then talk about what it means for our lives today.

"It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father" (John 13:1). Passover is the time of the year when Jews celebrate their deliverance from slavery. They remember that a lamb was slain and its blood was spread over the door frames, and not only were they delivered from death, they were given their freedom. Every year on Passover, every Jewish family sacrificed a lamb to thank God for their freedom. This year, this Passover, Jesus would become the Passover lamb whose blood will be shed, not just for one person, or one family, or even one nation to be set free, but for the entire world to have their sins forgiven and be reconciled to God. Jesus knows this is about to take place. John tells us "Jesus knew that the hour had come," that he only had a matter of days left before his death.

Have you ever thought about what you would do if you knew you only had a short time left? The second most common bucket list activity is to travel the world and see things like the northern lights, the pyramids, the Coliseum. Do you know the most common bucket list goal? Run a marathon! Most of us are thinking, "If I tried to run a marathon, that's how I would actually kick the bucket!" Most of us, if we knew we only had a short time left, would want to do something fun and exciting. Look at what Jesus did: "Jesus got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him" (John 13:4-5).

Washing feet is not a part of normal life in our culture. Unless you give pedicures for a living, or are perhaps a nurse, or you lost some sort of strange bet to your friends from college, most likely you have never washed someone else's feet. But in the ancient world, washing feet before a meal was just as common as washing your hands before a meal is in our world. Washing feet was basic sanitation and hygiene. Remember, thousands of years ago they didn't ride around in cars. They walked everywhere they went, and for the most part, their streets weren't paved. If it was dry the roads were dusty; if it was wet they were muddy, not to mention they lived in a day without plumbing. Without trying to be crass, most people relieved themselves in buckets and then emptied those buckets out the window onto the street. They didn't have cars, so they used donkeys and horses and oxen to transport their goods and the

animals relieved themselves on the streets. If you walk into a house after plodding your way through the dirt and the muck and the waste, you need to clean your feet. But here's the thing: washing feet was so foul and disgusting that nobody wanted to do it. Who wants to get mud, feces, and urine off someone else's stinky, calloused feet? That was disgusting. The task was usually reserved for slaves—and not just any slave: only the lowest ranking slave in the house. A guy named Christopher Thomas wrote his doctoral dissertation on this topic and after writing almost 300 pages, this was one of his main conclusions, "Footwashing is the most menial task, unrivaled in all antiquity." It was the lowest task you could possibly perform. In the first century world where the primary currency was honor and shame, it was unthinkable for a person of nobility, status, or recognition to wash someone's feet.

That's why Peter responds as he does: "Jesus came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus replied, 'You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' 'No,' said Peter, 'you shall never wash my feet'" (John 13:6-8). It's not like Peter is trying to be obstinate or difficult. He doesn't want to be disrespectful toward Jesus—quite the opposite! Peter simply can't possibly think of a world in which it makes sense for Jesus, his Master and Messiah to wash his feet. He respected Jesus too much to let him do something like that. Think about the person you have the most respect for in the entire world: maybe for some of the younger people in the room it's Taylor Swift; for others it's Michael Jordan or Peyton Manning or Patrick Mahomes or their favorite author or their favorite grandparent or their favorite president or favorite actor. Whoever it is, whoever you respect most in the world, imagine if they came to your house for an evening. You'd want them to have a good time and enjoy themselves. But imagine that as you were walking past the restroom, the door is open and you see your guest of honor on their hands and knees, scrubbing your filthy toilet. That's nearly the equivalent of what Jesus is doing here. If you saw your guest of honor doing that in your house, you'd probably tell them to stop; you'd rather anyone do that than **your** guest of honor! That's why Peter refuses to let Jesus wash his feet. It's his devotion for Jesus that caused his objection.

But look how Jesus responds: "Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no part with me'" (John 13:8). At first glance, that sounds like a confusing statement, but it might be the most pivotal line in the entire story. Here's what I mean: it's at this point that it becomes clear that the foot washing is pointing to a reality that is far beyond the basin and the towel and some dirty feet. When Jesus washed the filth away from his disciples' feet it *symbolized* his washing the sins away from his disciples' hearts. Here's another way of saying it: the foot washing was a physical act that pointed to a spiritual reality. That's why Peter can't belong to Jesus unless he lets Jesus wash his feet, because to follow Jesus and belong to him, you have to be cleansed, you have to be purified, you have to have your sins washed away and forgiven. And that's exactly what Jesus came to do.

But there is more: this is not just a picture of salvation, it's also a living instruction, a flesh and blood illustration of what Jesus wants us to do for others:

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. (John 13:12-17)

At a personal level, this is where the story gets really challenging. Jesus says, "I'm your leader and I'm a servant, so if you want to follow me, you must become a servant; there is no other way. It's not enough to say you admire me, it's not enough to study my life and memorize my teachings, it's not enough for you

to appreciate my humility. If you want to be my follower, you must actually humble yourself and become a servant”—to see the needs in people’s lives, the needs that are lowly and embarrassing and not interesting, the kind of needs that most people think are beneath them, and then, with joy and honor, gladly do that. Jesus says it’s not enough for you to know this story about selfless love and service, “you will be blessed if you do them.”

There are so many things we could say about this, but I want to make three observations. First, Jesus was the first servant-leader the world ever knew. This is of course a very encompassing statement, and here’s what I mean by it: One of my jobs while I was in college was to help my professor with his PhD research on the politics of Jesus. My main assignment was to survey all the literature in existence, every archive in every library in the world that describes the actions of a person in power to see how the actions of Jesus compare to theirs. We can say, as a historical fact, that there is no record in all of history of leaders humbling themselves to serve those beneath them. We are talking about tens of thousands of documents describing thousands of different leaders from a vast stretch of time, and there is not a single example of a leader who genuinely serves. Until Jesus.

When Jesus was born, Herod the Great was king of Israel. Many people are familiar with the biblical account of Herod ordering all the baby boys of Bethlehem to be killed when he heard that Jesus had been born. Though that’s a horrifying story, it’s just the tip of the iceberg. Herod executed several of his wives and two of his sons. When he got sick and it was clear his death was approaching, he knew no one in Israel would mourn his passing, so he ordered dozens of noble people throughout the country be arrested, and instructed that upon his death, the noble people be killed, too, so that there would be weeping and mourning throughout the land on the day that Herod died. That’s the type of leader that the people of Israel were used to: someone who ruled over his subjects and exploited them. That’s all they ever knew. And then Jesus entered the scene; in time, his life and example would spark a Copernican revolution in this regard. If Google existed 2000 years ago and you typed in the phrase “servant leadership,” there would have been zero hits. I typed it this week; there were over 10,000,000. Jesus changed the way we think about power dynamics and leadership and character. Most of us like the idea of humility and we want to work for a servant-hearted leader. We have Jesus to thank for inventing the idea. Not only did he say, “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve” (Mark 10:45), but he literally got down on his hands and knees, took the role of the lowest slave, and washed the filth off his disciples’ feet.

There are a lot of leaders in this room. Some of you are teachers who lead a classroom, husbands who lead a marriage, company owners who lead an organization, managers who lead a group, coaches who lead a team. God has given so many of the people in this church incredible influence. Whatever realm or space where you have leadership influence, are you using that influence the way Jesus did? When you realize that you are the most influential person in the room, that you get to set the tone, that others are looking to you to set the tone, will you do what Jesus did, and use your position to wash feet and selflessly serve those around you? I know a pastor who was promoted to be the senior pastor of a church he was already serving. When he took over, the church was in a complete mess. The church had over 10 million dollars of debt; it was in a serious crisis. He had many hard decisions to make. Because the church was in such dire straits financially, this pastor asked the elders not to give him a raise and said he’d happily serve at his previous salary. But because of all the extra responsibility he was carrying, the elders denied his request and gave him a \$10,000 annual raise. Do you know the first thing he did with his raise? He went to his bank, withdrew \$10,000, put \$1,000 into 10 different envelopes, and put the envelopes in the mailboxes of ten of his coworkers at the church. He had influence, he had power, he had more resources. Instead of using them to serve himself, he followed the way of Jesus and served those he was called to lead.

First observation—Jesus was the first servant-leader the world ever knew. Second, Jesus called his followers to become servants. Remember his words in John 13:14-15: “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.” It’s not enough for us to read this passage and say, “Wow, the Son of God getting down on his hands and knees—how inspiring.” If we want to be his followers, we must do the same thing. That’s where the rubber meets the road. When you read this story, you have to stop and ask yourself, “Is it truly the desire of my heart to become like Jesus and lovingly give up my rights, my preferences and my honor to serve other people?” What would that look like in your marriage, with your kids, with your parents, with your co-workers? This question changes everything.

A while back I was reading the story of Eric Liddell. That name might ring a bell for you: he’s the Scottish runner who competed in the 1924 Olympics and who is the subject of the movie *Chariots of Fire*. Even though he qualified for the Olympics, he couldn’t run in the event he trained for because that race was held on a Sunday and that violated his convictions, so at the last minute he entered an event he hadn’t trained for at all and ended up winning the gold medal. He became an instant hero back home, and even though he could have returned to Scotland to fame and fortune, he decided to move to China to become a missionary. He lived in China for 18 years, and during his time there things got worse and worse. When WWII hit, things got so dangerous he sent his wife and children home, but he stayed. He didn’t want to leave the people he was serving when they needed him the most. Eventually, in 1943, the Japanese captured the city he was living in and he was placed in an internment camp. In the camp he suffered from disease and malnutrition, but he didn’t let that stop him from treating other people’s medical needs and even starting a school for the kids who were there. Perhaps most impressive of all, when Winston Churchill managed to secure his freedom in a prisoner exchange, Liddell refused to be set free and instead, on his own authority, he sent a pregnant woman home in his place, saving both her life and the life of her child. Just months after he made that decision, he died.

What is it that would cause an Olympic hero to turn his back on fortune and fame, make his life about serving other people, and then, in prison, exchange both his freedom and his life for a woman he barely knew? It was the example of Jesus. Jesus was a servant. Eric not only believed in Jesus, but he also followed Jesus. Some would of course call it a waste, but do you know the names of any other Olympic athletes from the 1920s, 1930s, or 1940s? What makes a legacy is not how fast someone can run or how much money they make or how many records they break. What makes a legacy is how you treat other people, how you love, how you serve.

I was talking to a friend this week who told me his coworker has recently undergone cancer treatment. Surgery went well but she is still in recovery. One of her co-workers who is a Christian decided to give up her paid time off so that she can stay home and recover without worrying about losing her pay. How beautiful is that? How Christ-like is that?

First, Jesus was the first servant-leader the world ever knew. Second, Jesus called his followers to become servants. Third, becoming a servant allows people to see Jesus in your life. Most Christians I know would say, “I want people to see Jesus in me.” Serving is the pathway to make that happen. Later in this same chapter, Jesus said, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35). Such an incredible statement. Jesus didn’t say that it would be our theology, our church attendance, our tithing, or our voting—he said it would be our love. Jesus refuses to allow us to define love in general or self-seeking terms. In our world, when most people say, “I love you,” it typically means, “Being around you makes me feel good about myself. I think you are attractive or good or smart or entertaining or interesting. You fill me up. You make me feel significant.” But that’s not love. That’s hunger, that’s need. That’s using a person, not giving yourself to another person. Did you know that scientific studies have shown that fathers spend more time with their kids who are more physically

attractive than their children who are not. How wrong is that? Even one of the most sacred relationships in the world is oftentimes tainted, not driven by selfless love but driven by what we get in return. Real love is not based upon what someone looks like, or what someone has to offer, or how you fee; it's based on seeing someone through God's eyes, getting a vision of who they could be, of what God wants to bring about in their lives, and doing whatever is possible, in selfless service, to see that glorious future become reality. That's the sort of action that helps people to know you are Jesus' disciple.

A while ago I was back in Lexington, at a party with lots of friends and lots of people I didn't know, as well. A man I didn't recognize came up to me and introduced himself. He told me his name and said he went to church with my wife's family and was in their life group. As we talked, I found out he was from China and was here in Lexington for work. I was curious about his story so I asked him, "Growing up in China, how did you become a Christian?" He replied, "Oh! I'm not a Christian. I'm actually still trying to figure out if I believe in God or not." I said, "That's a great place to be. Let me ask you a question: as you are trying to figure things out, from everything you've considered so far, what do you think is the best reason to be an atheist and what do you think is the best reason to be a Christian?" He said, "Wow, I've never really boiled it down to that. I suppose the best reason to be an atheist is that religion seems culturally contrived. I grew up in China and I didn't know anyone who believed in God. I moved here and almost everyone does. So it seems like it's all just dependent on where you're born." He then continued, "The best reason to be a Christian is the life group I'm a part of with your wife's family. The way they love each other, the way they love me, I've never experienced anything like it before in my entire life. The best explanation for the way they love each other is that God is real." Even as he said that I thought, "That's John 13! That's exactly what Jesus said should happen!" When we become humble servants, when we love one another above ourselves, people see Jesus in us and know that God is real.

As we wrap up, here's the last thing I want to leave you with: just as the disciples had to let Jesus wash them in order for them to truly belong to him, we have to let Jesus wash us if we want to belong to him. The disciples had mud and filth that needed to be washed off their feet; we all have sin and guilt and shame that needs to be washed off our hearts. Sometimes we are like Peter and we're too proud to let Jesus stoop down and do it; other times we try to pretend and deny we need to be cleaned at all. But remember what Jesus told Peter, "Unless I wash you, you won't belong to me." Every one of us has made mistakes. Every one of us has dirty laundry. But the good news is that Jesus isn't just willing to bend down and wash your feet—he's willing to die on a cross to wash away your sins. That's the gospel message. No matter where you find yourself at today, no matter what mistakes you may have made, Jesus wants to clean you and make you new. The way Jesus cleans us is through the waters of baptism. Baptism is our way of saying to Jesus, "I'm done running, I'm done fighting. I'm ready to surrender and give you my life." Jesus takes that simple faith, and when you go under the water, he rolls up his sleeves, washes away every sin you've ever committed and gives you a brand new heart.