

# **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

## **Sermon Series: Follow the Leader**

### **Dirty Feet Discipleship**

(John 13:1-17)

Study #6

#### **Introduction: Leading well...**

Of all the gifts the Holy Spirit distributes to the church, the gift that may be most on the radar of many, many people in these days is the gift of leadership.<sup>1</sup>

Christianity Today began publishing *Leadership Journal* in the late 70's. I started subscribing in 1980 and haven't missed an issue.

Bill Hybels and the Willow Creek Association have put together THE LEADERSHIP SUMMIT every year since 1995 for the single purpose of developing the spiritual gift of leadership in the local church.

I've read all sorts of helpful books about leadership from all kinds of people - from those inside and those outside the church.<sup>2</sup>

In this day and age, in the church of Jesus, leadership is a very big deal. The kind of leadership her leaders give her is crucial. And, as important as leadership is, followership is more important still.

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<sup>1</sup> See Romans 12:8; 1 Corinthians 12:28 (translated "*administrations*" in the New American Standard Bible)

<sup>2</sup> I've benefited greatly from Bill Hybels, Leonard Sweet, Kouzes and Posner, T. J. Addington, Ed Stetzer, Henry Blackaby, Gene Wood, Patrick Lencioni and others.

Some disciples are called to lead. All disciples are called to follow. And the first call to every disciple - even leading disciples - is to follow. Jesus says, "***Follow Me***" long before He says anything like, "*Lead for me*"!

On this Palm Sunday morning, five days away from Good Friday and a week away from resurrection Sunday, we come to the final installment in a six weeks long exploration of what it means to "follow our Leader." And in the passage before us, our Leader both teaches and models a banner truth about following.

The scene for this final lesson is a late night gathering with His closest companions, the twelve apostles.<sup>3</sup>

As we turn to John 13, we watch as the whole group (the twelve disciples and Jesus) has gathered together in an upstairs room in a home in Jerusalem. They have come together to eat the annual Passover meal.

#### **"Setting the Table" At the Last Supper (vv. 1-3)**

##### **Intro: The Time and Place of the Last Supper**

The meal for which the group had gathered on this occasion (often referred to as the Last Supper) took place on Thursday evening.

They ate this meal one full day before the citizens of Jerusalem would eat their Passover.

Historical records tell us that Galileans (which Jesus and the disciples were) observed the Passover on Nisan 14 (as per biblical instructions in Exodus) and that the Judean Jews celebrated Passover and killed the Passover lamb on Nisan 15.

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<sup>3</sup> Chapters 13-17 of John's Gospel comprise what is referred to as the Upper Room Discourse. Here, we have the account of the last meeting Jesus ever had with His followers before His crucifixion. His purpose here was to equip them to successfully "follow" after He has died, the events of John 13 being less than fifteen hours away from nails being pounded in His flesh. Most of what is recorded in John 13-17 is not recorded in the other Gospel accounts.

The discrepancy between the days on which Passover was celebrated was due to the different calendars used by the Judeans and the Galileans, and not to any disobedience on the part of the Judeans.<sup>4</sup>

John lets us in on the thoughts of Jesus on this Thursday night, this night before His death. We are not surprised to discover that Jesus knew exactly what was going to happen to Him.

### Jesus... (v. 1)

...knows

*[1]...Jesus KNOWING that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father*

His whole life had been aimed toward the cross. Now it is time. The hour has come. He's about to return to the Father He had left in glory when He came to fulfill His mission on earth.

Skip down a little bit. Verse three tells us that Jesus knew three truths that steeled Him for the horror of these coming hours.

*[3] Jesus, KNOWING that that Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God*

Confident of His **limitless resources**, His point of **origination**, and His **ultimate destination**, He was equipped to move forward to fulfill His life's purpose.

He was aware of all this, but He was NOT preoccupied with what was coming His way - the brutality of the trials, the scourging, the mocking, and the horrible death. No, the welfare of His disciples was at the front of His mind.

...loves (v. 1)

*[1]... having LOVED His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.*

Loved them **"to the end"** - and what does that mean? Are we to understand by this that Jesus never stopped loving them? He loved them right up until the end?

Well, that is certainly true. But that doesn't begin to plumb the depths of what John is saying.

The real significance of the words **"to the end"** centers on the degree to which He loved those twelve disciples. He loved them to the uttermost. Nobody loved those men the way Jesus did. His love for His followers was the purest, the most sacrificial love they had ever experienced.

And the same is true, today. Jesus' love for His followers is a perfect love. It is compelling. And if you, a disciple of Jesus, are ever tempted to doubt that love, look at the lengths to which He was willing to go to prove that love and to serve you with the salvation you could have never earned on your own!

Jesus' love is perfect and He promises that He will never pull the rug out from under us and remove that love. His love is the solid foundation upon which we can build lives that have any meaning at all in a world of drought and wars and recession and cancer and divorce and heartache.

John focuses on Jesus, here, of course. But in this introduction to the Upper Room Discourse, he mentions another character: Judas Iscariot.

By the time the crew climbed the stairs for this Passover meal, Judas had already decided to go through with his plan to betray Jesus.

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<sup>4</sup> From *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* by Harold Hoehner. The following day, all Jerusalem observed Passover and sacrificed the Paschal lamb in the middle of the afternoon, precisely the time at which Jesus, the Lamb of God, died.

## Judas (v. 2)

*[2] During supper<sup>5</sup>, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him*

Have you ever seen movies that paint a picture of Judas as a deluded political radical who was really working for Jesus' political success by his actions?

It's certainly an interesting slant. But Scripture won't allow it. The Bible's take is that Judas ruthlessly betrayed Jesus by handing Him over to the ruling Jews, fully knowing what the results would be for Jesus.

All we need to do is recall the event of Mary's anointing from John, chapter 12, to understand what motivated Judas. It was his greed that opened the door for such a satanic idea to fill his mind.

Evil is real. And Judas is portrayed in the Bible as having been tragically given over to evil. He was not a misguided zealot and he was completely culpable for his actions. The devil put a diabolical idea into a very receptive mind.

Judas' upcoming deed has to be mentioned. But the primary focus at the Passover meal is the outrageous action that Jesus took midway through the meal. He washed the feet of His disciples.

### **The Confusion Brought About By Foot-Washing (vv. 3-8a)**

#### **A Revolting Service (vv. 3-5)**

Today, we don't consider foot-washing a necessary courtesy provided by every host to his or her guests. But today, our streets are paved and we have designated garbage dumps!

In the ancient world, foot-washing was not just a social nicety. It was a necessity.

A servant (usually the lowliest servant in the home) was given the onerous assignment of washing the feet of guests, as the task was so disgusting that guests would not be asked to do the chore for themselves.

Foot-washing was necessary because of the condition of the city streets of the ancient near east.

It's easy to imagine what feet would look like (and smell like!) after a long day of trudging through muddy streets with sandals on.

But along with the dirt, garbage was dumped into the streets, where dogs roamed, eating the garbage - and leaving behind an even bigger mess!

Mud and grime and more were caked on to the sandals and feet of the thirteen men who came together to eat the Passover meal in Jerusalem.

By the time they had gathered in that upper room, it had been a long day. The disciples had spent most of their daylight hours preparing for the Passover meal.

They had gone to the market to get supplies and to buy food, which meant lots of walking on the city's streets and THAT meant lots of filth between their toes.

As they entered the home, the Twelve had probably expected the common courtesy of having their feet washed.

But, not having been greeted by a servant at the door, they all proceeded to the Upper Room to eat the Passover - with dirty feet.

I've always imagined that the twenty-six dirty, smelly feet of thirteen grown men was making the air fouler by the minute. Finally, after some time had passed, somebody moved to remedy the situation.

That "somebody" was Jesus.

*[3] Jesus...[4] got up from supper, and laid aside His garments, and taking a towel, He girded Himself. [5] Then He poured water into the basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.*

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<sup>5</sup> This Gospel is the only one that does not show Jesus instituting the Lord's Supper at this meal.

Jesus proceeded to untie the sandals<sup>6</sup> of His disciples. He began the work of washing their grimy, filthy, smelly, sweaty feet.<sup>7</sup>

Now, let me ask - how would **you** feel if you were one of the twelve apostles, and Jesus came to you with a basin and a towel to wash your feet?

We westerners have a hard time letting anyone get near enough to wash our feet. But would we Christians not have exceptional difficulty allowing Jesus to be our foot-washer? We'd be embarrassed, shocked, self-conscious.

We might have done what Simon Peter did.

Jesus was making the rounds, going from disciple to disciple. We don't know how many sets of feet He had washed before He came to Peter. Peter protested!

#### **Peter's Protest (vv. 6-8a)**

*Peter questions (v. 6)*

**[6] So He came to Simon Peter. He said to Him, "Lord, do You wash my feet?"**

The apostle Peter knew one thing for sure. If HE was the Lord and Master, he sure wouldn't be washing feet! Foot-washing was to be done at the door, before dinner, by the lowliest of servants.

Here it is being done at the table, during the meal, by Jesus - their Leader!

Jesus understands Peter's confusion.

*Jesus reassures (v. 7)*

**[7] Jesus answered and said to him, "What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter."**

OK – and that answer might have satisfied some people. Not Peter. He wasn't about to sit still while His Lord performed such a degrading act.

You can just hear the emotion in his voice.

*Peter refuses! (v. 8)*

**[8a] Peter said to Him, "Never shall You wash my feet!"**  
(Literally, "You shall not ever wash my feet forever!")

And you know - I understand where Peter's coming from. I know what He was saying. I don't think I'd like Jesus washing my feet, either.

And if I didn't say it out loud, I would have been thinking the same thing. "Don't wash my feet, Lord. That's not Your place!" Don't you imagine that's what all the disciples were thinking?

But there was purpose to Jesus' action here. There always is. It was necessary that He wash Peter's feet.

We watch as Jesus takes this simple act of foot-washing and crafts out of it two crucial life lessons for Peter - and for all followers of all time.

Listen as Jesus drive home the first lesson of the basin and the towel.

#### **The Clarity Brought About By Foot-Washing (vv. 8b-17)**

##### **Foot-Washing and Walking with Jesus (vv. 8b-10)**

*Foot-washing necessary (v. 8b)*

**[8b] Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me."**

<sup>6</sup> Remember John 1:27, where John the Baptist declared that he was unworthy to loose Jesus' sandal strap.

<sup>7</sup> See Philippians 2:12. There, the apostle Paul describes Jesus' incarnation, which is what Jesus pictures by His act in the Upper Room.

There's something about this washing ritual that pictures something foundational to a relationship with Jesus: No washing; no relationship.

Well, swinging wildly from extreme to extreme, Peter the Pendulum responds to this revelation with a typically Peter-like remark.

Why settle for a partial cleansing? If a partial cleansing helps, wouldn't a whole bath do more good?

*Peter the Pendulum (v. 9)*

**[9] Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, then wash not only my feet, but also my hands and my head."**

Nice try, Peter (And don't you feel sorry for him? I do. Everything he says gets corrected.).

But Jesus knew exactly what He was doing. Foot-washing pictured perfectly what He wanted to say about nurturing an on-going relationship with Him.

Listen carefully, as Jesus pulls Peter back to the center.

*After bathing, only foot-washing (vv. 10-11)*

**[10] Jesus said to him, "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you."**

**[11] For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, "Not all of you are clean."<sup>8</sup>**

Jesus was using the language of bathing and foot-washing to teach something crucial about cleansing from sin.

To have "**bathed**" is to be washed clean of sin. It is to be forgiven. Forgiveness of sin is granted whenever anyone places his or her trust in Jesus Christ for salvation.

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<sup>8</sup> Clearly, Jesus means to say two things. The first part of His comments are directed at the group, driving home the need for foot-washing for the clean person who simply dirties his feet. The second part "**but not all of you**" - is intended for Judas, who was not at all clean.

If you have recognized your need for cleansing from sin and have placed your trust in Jesus' death and resurrection to provide that cleansing, you are CLEAN! You are forgiven. You are heaven-bound and nothing will ever change that.

But, as it is in the natural world, so it is in our walks with the Lord.

After a shower we may step in the mud and get dirty. We are clean - but we have to wash our feet.

Spiritually speaking, when I lose my footing, slip and fall into sin, I need to be washed off. Maybe:

- I have ventured into gossip mode OR
- I have played the part of a glutton OR
- I have used my words to wound OR
- I have backed away from trust in God to cowardly faithlessness OR
- I have chosen to love something other than the Lord with my heart, soul, mind, and strength.

When I get dirty, I need to be cleaned up. I need to have my feet washed. And how do I go about getting clean after dirtying myself?

I CONFESS my sins to the Lord. Regular, honest, specific confession of sin is a very important part of a believer's walk with God.

What is called for is not a general whitewashing, "*Lord, I know I've been bad this week.*"

What is needed is a pointed admission of particular wrong-doing: "*I spoke to my wife (or husband) meanly*" - "*I cheated on a test today*" - "*I drank alcohol to the point where I wasn't in control of myself last night.*"

You get the picture. Specifics count in confession.

And what does Jesus do when we confess? He rises from His throne in glory, takes off His royal robes, wraps Himself with a servant's towel and washes the filth off our feet so that we can walk in the confidence that we are clean again!

This week, you and I are going to get dirty. Count on it. But Jesus has provided a way to get clean - confession.

That means agreeing with God that what you did was wrong. And when you do that, honestly and sincerely confessing to God, Jesus will serve you as He served the Twelve by washing your feet and you will experience the cleansing power of Jesus after you fall.

Well, after this explanation of foot-washing, Jesus went on to wash Peter's feet, and the feet of all the other disciples. Then, He returned to His place at the low table, reclining around it with the others.

I can only imagine that everyone breathed a sigh of relief, just glad that the whole embarrassing episode was over. But it wasn't over.

Once seated, Jesus brought up the foot-washing all over again to teach something else.

This time, He used the foot-washing to explain something about how the community that would form in His Name was to act toward each other.<sup>9</sup>

#### **Foot-Washing and Walking with Each Other (vv. 12-17)**

*Jesus stopped for a de-briefing (v. 12)*

***[12] So when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments and reclined at the table again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?"***

I think it's interesting that we don't have a response to this question from Peter - or from anyone else. Having watched as Simon Peter was corrected every time he opened his mouth, they are all less than eager to suggest an answer to Jesus' question.

*"Well, it appears that You washed our feet, Jesus. But why don't You go ahead and tell us what You just did."*

So, Jesus explained what He did and how that defines what it means to follow Him, a Master who serves.

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<sup>9</sup> It is extremely significant that of all the truths that Jesus chose to speak about on the last night He spent with His disciples, the first lesson was that of servanthood.

*Following a Servant (vv. 13-16)*

***[13] You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. [14] If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.***<sup>10</sup>

That's really pretty transparent logic.

- Jesus is the Teacher and Lord - check!
- We are the followers - check!
- The Teacher gives an example for His followers to follow - check!
- The Teacher served us as a common slave would have served us - check!
- Now - we are to serve each other as a common slave would serve - CHECK!

There was never any question about who was the Leader of the group. Jesus was the Leader. And, for three years He set an example in all kinds of ways in all kinds of settings.

When He wanted to build some new character trait into His followers, He first modeled it.

Over the last five Sundays we've seen Him model and teach the centrality of WORSHIP, COMMUNITY, WITNESS, REST, and GENEROSITY.

Here at the very end of His life, He wanted to hammer home the importance of **SERVANTHOOD**. Jesus' vision is that His followers are to be known as servants.

So, He preached a sermon about the benefits of service and gave a series of lectures entitled, "Ten Steps to Service."

NO!

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<sup>10</sup> No New Testament text requires foot-washing of believers, not even 1 Timothy 5:10.

He modeled **servanthood**. He took off the festive garments always worn at Passover, clothed Himself as a common servant, filled a basin with water, and performed the humble act of washing His disciples' feet.

And the message that shouts from this action is so unambiguously clear that it hardly needs saying. But since He went ahead and said it, I'll go ahead and say it, too:

***[15] For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. [16] Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him.***

Servanthood is not **ADVANCED** discipleship. It is **ESSENTIAL** discipleship. And Jesus' wonderfully pragmatic conclusion to this scene in the Upper Room puts an exclamation mark to all He's been saying.

*Knowing is nothing; DOING is what it's all about! (v. 17)*

***[17] If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.***

It does me no good to be able to quote John 13 from memory - unless I serve you. Knowing the importance of foot-washing in the first century is pointless - unless I wash your feet. Being able to exegete every word and phrase of this passage counts for nothing - unless I embrace servanthood and become a servant.

Jesus expects us to follow Him into a life of servanthood in all the arenas of life in which we find ourselves.

What would it look like if, this afternoon, you adopted a servant's mentality at home? What would your wife or your husband say? What would your kids say? Your parents? Your siblings? Your roommate?

What if, tomorrow, you took a servant's mentality to work or to school with you? If you went to work or school remembering that you were called to be a servant, what difference would it make in the way you treated your students, your teachers, your classmates, your employers, your employees?

What would it look like if you brought the basin and the towel to the relationships you sustain with your brothers and sisters in Christ?

One of my greatest visions is that Northwest will become more and more marked by a servant culture.

Your service need not be big or grandiose. You can think small and unobtrusive. For instance -

- If you're not a guest, don't have small children, don't have to carry a bunch of stuff into the building, and are healthy, try parking as far away from the front door as possible on Sunday morning so that others who might need better access might have the close spots.
- If you see a need advertised in the bulletin or hear of one mentioned during a worship service, ask yourself if you might be able to meet that need.
- If you see someone who appears new to church, greet him or her warmly and help direct them to a class that fits.
- If you see someone who seems sad or upset, take the time to pray for them - even pray with them. Listen to them.
- If you discover that someone is in particular need, take inventory of what you have that might benefit them.

Very little in the way of extra training is required for learning how to serve. All we really need to do is open our eyes and our hearts, agree to follow our Leader into servanthood - and GO!

### **Conclusion:**

What does it take to be a successful follower of Jesus, the ultimate Servant? Remember dirty feet.

You are going to get them from time to time. Try as you might, you will occasionally mess up. You are going to sin. And when you sin, you can go to Jesus, your Savior/Servant, and ask Him to take up the basin and towel and do for you what He did for the Twelve. He'll clean you up.

People around you have dirty feet, too. Sometimes that dirt will represent sinfulness that needs to be forgiven. Sometimes, the dirty feet will represent needs that can be served.

You're a follower. Your Leader has led the way. Following your Leader means that you embark on the exciting journey of servanthood. And you can follow your Leader by washing the feet of needy people.