From Greatest to Least
John 13:12-17
Sermon 3/21/21

Invite the congregation to stand and read John 13:12-17:

“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.”

John 13:12-17 ESV

Pray.

My sermon today falls under 3 subheadings:
I. Least of All Time
II. Pitfalls of Pride
III. Blessed Servitude

I. Least of All Time

Heading into this past Super Bowl, all the pre-game talk and all the hype was about two quarterbacks facing off against each other - Tom Brady and Patrick Mahomes - and which one, when it’s all said and done, would be considered the GOAT (greatest of all time). Would it be the old veteran who was nearing the end of his prolific career, or the young stud who was just getting started? Unfortunately, the outcome was not favorable for Chiefs fans, and I think it’s ok to admit, painful though it is, that Tom is the quarterback GOAT.

But the GOAT debate is not just in football. It’s the same thing in basketball. Any college basketball fans out there? You know, March Madness has begun. Hopefully your bracket hasn’t busted yet.....In basketball, like football, we can turn on Sportscenter and hear sportscasters debate over which college basketball team is the greatest and which player is the greatest and which game-winning shot is the greatest.

You know, everyone wants to debate about who’s the greatest, but no one wants to debate about who’s the least. Everyone references the GOAT but no one references the LOAT (least of all time).

All of a sudden, I’m getting a vision for a Christian t-shirt campaign with the words, “From GOAT to LOAT,” written on the front. Bad idea?

The Least of All Time is not even a thing because all the attention and spotlight is on who is the greatest, while no one seems to care about who is the least.

I mean, what kid when standing in a line on the playground waiting to play kickball wants to be the last kid chosen? (I realize I just brought up a sore spot for some of you... it’ll be ok).
What high schooler when the grades are posted aspires to be at the very bottom of the class? (High schoolers, don’t answer that).

What adult, when applying for a new job, hopes to be least qualified?

What aspiring social media influencer wants to have the least number of friends or followers on social media?

We all want to be the greatest, but even if we can’t be the greatest, just don’t let us be the least.

No one in their right mind wanted to be considered the least…. until Jesus took a towel and a basin filled with water and redefined greatness by washing His disciples’ feet.

See, up to that point in history, the only people who washed others’ feet were the least, not the greatest. Jesus broke the cultural mold by introducing a new way forward.

After washing their feet, Jesus put on his outer garments and returned to his place of authority, saying, “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.”

Here in verse 13, Jesus refers to Himself as two titles which are translated “Teacher” and “Lord.” The reason Jesus uses both of these titles is because they are related to one another. If you follow His teaching, you will surrender to Him as Lord. And if you surrender to Him as Lord, you will follow His teaching.

Because of the claims Jesus made and the miracles He performed, you really aren’t allowed to pick and choose one or the other. He can’t be your Lord if He’s not your Teacher, and He can’t be your Teacher if He’s not your Lord. He’s either both or neither. He can’t be one or the other.

Speaking of teaching, in First Century Jewish culture, you wouldn’t choose a school as much as you would choose a Teacher, Rabbi, or Master -- someone to follow and learn from.

The Teacher, or Master, would take you under their wing in a mentoring relationship like Jesus had done with the twelve disciples. And it was the student’s, or follower’s, job to serve the Master. The students would be asked to perform almost any task or duty no matter how menial except for one…. wash feet. That job was reserved for the lowest ranking slave. Why? Because it was disgusting and dirty and therefore culturally inappropriate for anyone of any social standing or religious authority to do.

As Pastor Jim pointed out last week, after a long day of walking your feet could have been caked with a mixture of dirt, mud, and excrement. As a result, it was customary for the lowest ranking slave in the house to have the unpleasant duty of cleaning the feet of the guests.

The disciples were too proud to do this job. Jesus was not.

Jesus not only descended from heaven to earth, He descended from his seated position down to the floor in order to serve. It really is unbelievable when you stop and think about it. The Son of God cleaned the dung and dirt off the feet of the very people whom He created to worship Him and follow Him. Not to mention one of whom - Judas Iscariot - would betray Jesus. Jesus had foreknowledge of this, yet he chose to wash his betrayer’s feet anyway.
Who does that? What kind of God would lovingly create human beings in His image knowing full well that his most prized creation would betray him? And in the midst of being betrayed, who would choose to respond by humbly descending from heaven to earth to wash the feet of His betrayer?

I’ll tell you what kind of God would do that. Jesus would. And church, I’ve got good news! He still does these things for us today. He still serves His followers and yes, even His enemies.

When Jesus came, He turned the Teacher/student, King/servant, Master/slave relationship upside down by role modeling servant leadership... And by telling his disciples to go and do just as He has done.

Jesus got off his throne and onto his knees to serve you and me by washing our feet. The Greatest became the least so the least could become like the Greatest.

Jesus not only role modeled servant leadership, He invented it! The reason that servant leadership exists at all is because of the humble model Jesus set for us. He has provided us with a humble example, or pattern, to follow.

But serving with humility is easier said than done because there are dangers, or temptations - “pitfalls of pride” so to speak - that lure us away from imitating the humble way of our Lord.

II. Pitfalls of pride

Here are five pitfalls of pride that we need to beware of:

1. Controlling
2. Comparing
3. Competing
4. Criticizing
5. Credit-seeking

1. Controlling

Control often disguises itself as false humility. Control is the sin of Peter as was described in the previous few verses that Pastor Jim discussed last week. You’ll recall that when Jesus got to Peter, he resisted having his feet washed, saying, “‘Lord, are you going to 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.”

On the surface, Peter’s response appears to be humble, but it’s actually the opposite. In reality, Peter’s pride wouldn’t allow him to be served by Jesus.

Is this true of you? Are you too proud to be served? Are you too proud to allow someone else to wash your feet?

Are you someone who says, “Thanks but no thanks, Jesus. I’m too uncomfortable being served. I just can’t accept the fact that people want to pray for me. I can’t accept that offer to come clean
up my yard. I can’t accept that coaching, or counseling. I can’t accept that compliment. I can’t accept that meal. I can’t accept that financial support.”

Are you like Peter, too proud to be served?

Jesus answered Peter, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” 9 Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”

So after resisting at first, Peter decided he is going to allow Jesus to wash him... on his terms. “Ok Jesus, you can wash my feet, but also make sure to wash my hands and my head as well!” See, instead of simply submitting in humble obedience, Peter sought to regain control of the situation.

Be careful not to fall into the trap of feeling you need to control your relationship with Jesus. “You can serve me as long as it’s on my terms.”

Regarding control, Timothy Keller says this: “If at the very heart of your worldview is a man dying for his enemies, then the way you’re going to win influence in society is through service rather than power and control.” –Keller, King’s Cross.

The first pitfall of pride is control. The second is...

2. Comparing

On several occasions throughout the gospels, the disciples were guilty of comparing themselves to one another by arguing about who was the greatest.

For example, in Mark 9, after Jesus and his disciples landed in Capernaum, Jesus asked, “What were you discussing on the way?” 34 But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. 35 And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, ‘If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.’"

Comparison is a dangerous game because when we compare, we either put ourselves down, or we put others down. From this perspective, comparison fuels our self-righteousness, or pride.

Do you ever fall into the life-sucking, self-righteous cycle of comparison? Comparing your...

- Intellect
- Athleticism
- Marriage
- Body image
- Savings account
- Social media likes
- Kids’ accomplishments
- Church size
- Prayer life
- (Fill in the blank)

Jesus responds by saying, “If you want to be first, be last. If you want to go high, go low. If you want to become the greatest, become the least. Before you can be raised from the dead, die to your pride.”
In other words, stop being so consumed with comparing yourself to those around you and start focusing on serving them instead.

Comparing is the second pitfall of pride, which brings us to our third pitfall:

3. Competing

At various times throughout the gospels, the disciples would compete with one another for more of something. Usually, they would compete for more time, power, or favor.


Sometimes we compete with one another to try and earn God’s favor…. And sometimes we compete with God to try and earn one another’s favor.

Competing with God and with one another in order to gain more favor is a pitfall of our pride.

At one point James and John petitioned Jesus to sit on his right and left in glory. Why? So they could acquire more of Jesus’ time, power, and favor.

This is how Jesus responded in Mark 10:44-45:

Jesus said, “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,” and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

While James and John were busy competing with the other disciples for the places next to Jesus in heaven, Jesus was busy serving them, washing their feet, and sacrificing His life for their sins.

Now this concept of a slave, or a bond-servant, is a powerful image. Remember that foot washing was one of the unpleasant duties assigned to them. Jesus says, “Whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.”

See, when slavery is involuntary it is dehumanizing, cruel, and unjust. Unfortunately our country is all too familiar with the damaging effects of forced slavery.

But when slavery is voluntary, it’s different. When we choose to be God’s slaves, or His bond-servants, and willingly surrender ourselves to another’s authority, we can no longer be manipulated or taken advantage of. Instead, we are blessed by our voluntary servitude. More on that later.

Competing is the third pitfall of pride that we need to be wary of. And the fourth pitfall is...

4. Criticizing

The truth is, we won’t wash others’ feet if we’re too busy criticizing their lives or complaining about the task that God has told us to do.
In the Bible, complaining is usually referred to as grumbling. Remember back to the Old Testament, when God led Israel out of slavery into the wilderness. How did they “thank” God for delivering them from slavery? By grumbling about their current situation.

Exodus 16:3-4: “In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. 3 The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.”

And then God provided manna and quail for them to eat. But they weren’t done grumbling, were they? Criticizing, or complaining, is part of our sinful nature.

Skipping forward to the New Testament in John 6, Jesus taught his followers that He was the true manna that came down from heaven. He said, “I am the bread of life... Whoever eats this bread will live forever…. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.”

Upon hearing this, Jesus’ followers began to grumble. And many in the crowd stopped following Him altogether. So Jesus turned to his disciples and said, “Are you going to leave, too?”

See, there are some things Jesus does or says that make us uncomfortable. Like talking about eating His flesh and drinking His blood. Or like washing others’ feet. So we start to criticize. We start to grumble. Because we think we know better than God does.

Criticizing is a function of our pride. If we were God, we wouldn’t teach that way or allow people to suffer that way or let “those” people be served in that way.

Let me ask you a question: Are you a critical person? Are you quick to grumble about your spouse, kids, teachers, coaches, pastors, God?

If so, God may be asking you the same question he asked his disciples: Are you going to leave too? Or are you going to stay and serve the very people I have placed in your path?

Criticizing is the fourth pitfall of pride. Fifth and finally is the pitfall of...

5. Credit-seeking

One of the most challenging and liberating parts of serving is doing so secretly behind closed doors with no intention of ever receiving credit, recognition, or praise. But this takes a great deal of spiritual maturity.

John the Baptist is a great example of someone who did not seek to receive credit or praise, but rather testified to the lordship of Jesus as the Chosen Lamb of God.

On the other hand, prideful people often try to take credit for things they did as well as things they didn’t do. They like it when others affirm them, but they don’t like to affirm others. And they don’t want to share the accolades with anyone, especially God.

When we serve, we need to pay attention to our motivation. Who are we trying to impress? Whose praise are we seeking? Are we seeking to receive credit, or are we seeking to give the credit to God?
Controlling, comparing, competing, criticizing, and credit-seeking are the pitfalls of pride, and they are antithetical to the teaching of Jesus in John 13.

This brings me to my third and final subheading:

III. Blessed Servitude

After Jesus role modeled servant leadership by washing their feet, He said, “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.”

When a servant’s pride gets in the way and he refuses to serve, he foolishly attempts to elevate himself above the Master.

However, when the Master becomes a servant, the servant suddenly and miraculously finds him/herself on the same level as the Master. This is the beauty of the incarnation of Jesus.

God the Father humbly sent His Son Jesus to take on human flesh and dwell among us. As the Sent One, Jesus became one of us. He descended to our level; he lived the life that we should have lived, and died the death that we should have died! Jesus went from King to Servant, Master to Slave, Righteous to Rejected, Creator to Crucified, Greatest to Least.

Why? Because He loves us!

So when we serve as Jesus serves, we are being incarnational, just like Jesus. And we are blessed, just like Jesus. For, “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.”

Foot washing includes doing menial tasks for others without complaining, tasks that no one looks forward to doing. Washing dishes, folding laundry, cleaning toilets, raking leaves, shoveling snow, setting up chairs, taking out the trash, vacuuming, etc.

But foot washing also includes demonstrating Christ’s extravagant, sacrificial love to those who least expect it.

Several decades ago Dr. Tony Campolo was visiting Honolulu and there was a 6-hour time difference so he was wide awake and hungry at 3am. So Tony went out looking for a restaurant where he could get some coffee and a donut. As you might imagine, there were very few restaurants open but he stumbled upon a diner and sat down inside. The menu was greasy and the manager Harry was a little rough around the edges.

Before long, eight or nine promiscuous women entered the restaurant and sat down next to Tony. Before long, Tony realized that these women were actually prostitutes. Well, Tony began to overhear their conversation and as it turned out, one of the ladies named Agnes had a birthday the next day. And she mentioned during their conversation that no one had ever thrown her a birthday party.

After some small talk, the ladies left the diner and Tony asked the manager if the ladies were regulars. The manager said they come in at the same time every night. So Tony said, “What if we throw a birthday party for Agnes tomorrow night?” Harry agreed to the idea and between the two of them, they went to work decorating the entire restaurant, purchasing a cake, and inviting all her prostitute friends to attend her surprise birthday party at 3:30am the following night.
One by one the ladies came into the diner decked out with birthday decorations for Agnes. The place was packed full of prostitutes. It was wall to wall prostitutes... and Tony. And then Agnes came in and was welcomed by a big sound of, “Surprise! Happy birthday Agnes!” All her friends were there, and everyone was celebrating her. So Agnes started to cry. She was crying too hard to even blow out the candles on her cake.

Before cutting the cake, Agnes asked Tony if she could take the cake home and show it to her mom. She just lived a couple blocks away.

After Agnes left, there was a long awkward pause. And Tony said, “What if we pray for Agnes right now?” So Tony began to pray. I can only imagine what Tony prayed for. I’m guessing he prayed for Agnes to be cleansed of all the filth and dirt and grime that she had walked in. That God would remove all the dirty, filthy things that had been done to her over the years. And that she would surrender her life to the Sent One, the one who sacrificed his blood to forgive her of her sins and cleanse her of all unrighteousness.

After Tony finished praying, he opened his eyes. And the restaurant manager Harry said, “You didn’t tell me you were a preacher! What kind of church are you from anyway?”

Tony responded, “I belong to the kind of church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30am.”

Christ’s church is the type of church that washes one another’s feet and throws birthday parties for people like Agnes.

Church, let me ask you a question. In the story I just shared, who was the most blessed? Was it the one who received, or the one who gave? The one who was served, or the one whom God sent?

Follow the pattern of Jesus in John 13 and BE BLESSED!

“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.”

Let’s pray.