



Mother's Day, May 12, 2013
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Cram Session: Jesus' Parting Words – Serve! John 13:1-20

How many of you have ever crammed for a big test? In college I was a world-class crammer... especially in chemistry! The night before a big chem exam I would pore over the materials for hours until I thought I was ready for the test. It was amazing how much information I could cram into this brain of mine when I was motivated.

Beginning this morning we are going to look at the cram session on the night before the biggest test ever taken. The test is this: will Jesus, the Son of God come down from the Father, go to the cross and die for the world that God "so loved"? The salvation of the world rides on that question. The cross will be Jesus' big test.

Interestingly, however, the cram session is not for Jesus; it's for his disciples. Jesus' active ministry lasted about three years. During that time, crowds of thousands gathered to listen as he taught. Afterwards he often pulled the disciples aside and explained further what he had meant. But tonight is different. This is a private cram session for just the disciples. In 24 hours, Jesus will be dead. He has one more evening with his followers to impart and review the most important things he wants them to remember after he is gone. He is about to send them on a mission, and he wants them ready.

If you've ever sent a kid away to college you have an idea of what was going on here: that last dinner at home... those last few minutes as you cling together in the parking lot trying desperately to stuff one last piece of wisdom into their heads. Because you are about to leave them, and you want them to succeed. That's what Jesus is doing in this section of scripture we call the Upper Room discourse.

How important is this? John's gospel is 21 chapters long. The Upper Room discourse is five chapters long! One quarter of a book that covers three years of ministry is taken up by this cram session. Obviously John thinks this was really important. These are Jesus' parting words shared with his disciples. For the next seven weeks, we disciples are going to listen in as we receive our marching orders. We begin at chapter 13. (1-5)

If I stood up here and said, “I... am God... in the flesh” at least a few of you might find that hard to swallow! But that is exactly the claim John makes for Jesus. Starting with the prologue that introduces the eternal Word that became flesh and dwelt among us, and continuing with incredible stories of creative power—creating wine out of water, creating walking legs out of paralyzed stumps, creating seeing eyes out of clouded orbs, creating a living being out of the dead Lazarus, story after story—John makes the case that when we look at Jesus, we are looking at God.

Even Jesus’ words reinforce this claim. He uses the holy name of God... Yahweh ... “I am”...over and over again. I Am the Good Shepherd. I Am the Door. I Am the Light. I Am the Way, the Truth and the Life. I Am the Resurrection and the Life. I AM! For twelve chapters John makes the case that Jesus of Nazareth is the Eternal God of creation.

Then comes chapter 13, and Jesus seems to undercut the whole premise. What kind of “God” would do such a thing?! At these times, “streets” were filled with waste. Animal excrement and human excrement, too! Every morning the chamber pot was just dumped on the ground outside the house. When you walked through such streets, you ended up with feet caked in all manner of filth. When guests visited you, it was considered an essential act of hospitality to remove their sandals and wash their filthy feet, and because it was such a disgusting job it always fell to the lowest slave on the totem pole. If your job description included, “foot washing,” you knew you were on the bottom rung. There was no one lower in the house... no one less respected. The good news? Your career trajectory had only one way to go from there! Up!

So when Jesus—the rabbi of the group... the acknowledged, honored and beloved leader—got up from the table, took off his robe, wrapped a towel around himself, poured water into a basin, knelt down, removed John’s sandals, and began to wash his disgusting feet... the entire room gasped out loud. This was unheard of. Unthinkable. Unacceptable for a respected leader to do such a thing.

But this isn’t just any leader, is it? The Great “I Am!”...the Word made Flesh... that’s what John has been saying all along. This is the Son of God. In all the mythological literature in the world, there had never, ever been found one example of a god who did such a thing. In all the history ever written, there had never been found an example of a leader who performed this task for his followers. What Jesus did that night to kick off his Cram Session was utterly unprecedented... and thoroughly shocking!

Here is what one ancient writer says: “He who wraps the heavens in clouds wrapped round himself a towel. He who pours the water into the rivers and pools tipped water into a basin. And He before whom every knee bends in heaven and

on earth and under the earth knelt to wash the feet of his disciples." (Severian of Gabala, Bruner 748)

[Read 13:6-11]

This is Peter pre-denial... large and in charge. The one who will brag to Jesus, "Even if everyone else denies you, I never will." He's doing the same thing here, isn't he? Jesus makes his way round the table and finally it is Peter's massive and filthy feet that he reaches for, and Peter recoils. "I don't care if these other guys are willing to let you perform this degrading task on them. You will never wash my feet."

Actually, this is one of those moments where the English does not do justice to the original Greek. What Peter literally says is: "Not... not... will you ever wash my feet... into the ages!" He couldn't be clearer, could he? Then comes Jesus' haunting reply: "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

And it is here that it begins to dawn on you, "Ah... this isn't just about cleaning filthy feet. There is more to this than meets the eye." It is easy to jump to the moral of this story as being about service. But if you do, you have missed the main point. What is Jesus doing here? Here, at the beginning of the most concentrated section of teaching in the gospel, what is Jesus trying to tell them? Do you see it? This is a parable... a living parable. He tells Peter, "You do not now realize what I am doing, but later you will understand." Later when? Understand what? Do you understand?

Dale Bruner describes this story as a movie trailer... glimpses of the entire earthly career of Jesus. When Jesus removes his robe... what is that a reminder of? It takes us back to John 1 ... "In the beginning was the Word..." where the eternal Son of God leaves behind eternity and the Father and becomes flesh. He "disrobes" from his divine prerogatives so that he can "stoop" down to enter into human existence. The apostle Paul describes this magnificently in Philippians 2 when he declares that Jesus "did not count equality with God a thing to be clutched but emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave..." They don't realize it at the time, but as Jesus disrobes, puts on the towel and stoops down to serve them, it is a parable. Jesus is reenacting His incarnation; the greatest moment of "stooping down" in the history of the world.

But there are hints that he is also acting out his crucifixion. Do you recall the Good Shepherd teaching where Jesus said, "I lay my life down and I take it back up again?" The words here—for taking off his robe and taking up the towel—are exactly the same... and with the same result! He makes them clean. Within a few days, he will have "taken off his life" on the cross and "taken it up again" at the resurrection, and what will be the result? The cleansing of his people.

You read the Family Life letter from my mom this morning. I asked her to write of a time when serving me was hard. I think her disgusting story of discovering me after I had finger painted my crib, my wall and myself with the contents of my diaper—I think that qualifies... don't you? "But I can't write that," she said. "It's too crude." And I said, "It's perfect for this sermon." Someone who loves me discovers me in my own filth and takes the wretched responsibility of cleaning me up. That is exactly what Jesus has done for us. He finds us in our filth and, out of his love for us, lowers himself from his exalted place—stoops down in humility—to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves... make our filthiness clean again.

As much as I enjoyed creating my masterpiece in the crib that day, I was probably glad my mom cleaned me up. You would think that would be Peter's response too, wouldn't you? But actually, he is horrified and humiliated. Horrified that Jesus would stoop to do such a thing, and humiliated that he had to. And you know what? There are people in this room who feel the same way about Jesus. You like the idea of him being a great teacher, a miracle-worker, an inspirational figure in history. But when you see him drawing closer to you, and you realize his intentions—realize that he actually wants to expose and clean the filthy parts of your life—you are horrified and humiliated, and you reject Jesus' offer. Either you don't really think your feet are that dirty, or you know how dirty they really are and don't want anyone to see the real you, or you think that you can take care of it... you can clean up your own mess. So, you keep Jesus at arm's length... kind of like a Christian good luck charm. Pull him out in times of crisis, but otherwise... otherwise, you really aren't interested in what Jesus wants to offer. Does that describe you? If so, listen to Jesus again: "Unless I wash you, you have no part in me!"

But Jesus doesn't leave it there. Listen to the last part of the story. [v. 12-17] I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. What does Jesus mean? Should we have literal foot washing ceremonies regularly? Some churches do. Pope Francis started tongues a-wagging a few weeks ago when, for the first time, those whose feet he washed to celebrate Maundy Thursday included two young, Muslim women who were in prison. That stirred things up! But is this what Jesus meant?

Here's what I think he meant: We, the followers of Jesus, should serve others, just as He humbly served us. One of Jesus' memorable statements describing his own mission goes like this: "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus, who disrobed from his divine prerogatives and stooped down to earth, did so to serve his own creation. At this start of the Cram Session, he shockingly illustrates it by this living parable then says, "Do as I have done for you."

Why do we serve others? Because there is a need? Because we find it fulfilling? Because it makes us feel good? Perhaps. But remember, Jesus washed Judas' feet, too. Did he feel like doing that? Did that make him feel good? It is easier to

serve those we love and respect—although sometimes it can still be icky and disgusting—but what about the people we hate? Or who hate us? Our betrayers? Why would we serve them? I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. We serve others, even unlovely others, because Jesus served us. The heart of this story is this: we serve because Jesus served us. Period! We serve out of obedience, and in the power of and for the sake of Jesus. When we serve, it is not an altruistic act. It is the obedient response of one who has been sacrificially served by a greater.

A man named David Ireland wrote *Letters to an Unborn Child* while he was dying from a neurological disease. He wanted the child in his wife's womb, a child he would never know, to know something about him. And in one section, he honored his wife by describing what was necessary for them to go out for dinner.

It means that she has to dress me, shave me, brush my teeth, comb my hair, wheel me out of the house and down the steps, open the garage and put me in the car, take the pedals off the chair, stand me up, sit me in the seat of the car, twist me around so that I'm comfortable, fold the wheelchair, put it in the car, go around to the other side of the car, start it up, back it out, get out of the car, pull the garage door down, get back into the car, and drive off to the restaurant.

And then, it starts all over again; she gets out of the car, unfolds the wheelchair, opens the door, spins me around, stands me up, seats me in the wheelchair, pushes the pedals out, closes and locks the car, wheels me to the restaurant, then takes the pedals off the wheelchair so I won't be uncomfortable. We sit down to have dinner, and she feeds me through the entire meal. And when it's over she pays the bill, pushes the wheelchair out to the car again and reverses the same routine."

And when it is over...after she had undressed him, washed him, put him to bed and crawled in next to him, she would snuggle up and say, "Honey, thank you for taking me out to dinner." (Letters, pp 31.32, quoted from How to impact and Influence,, John Maxwell.)

The longing of every person who loves and follows Jesus is to hear these words at the end of our life: "Well done, good and faithful servant." Do you hear that? Jesus saying, "You were such a great servant! You really gave your life to others. I'm proud of you." The irony of course, is that the one who will be bragging on us for being a good servant is the Lord of the universe who set aside his robe, put on a towel, knelt before us, and washed away the filth of our lives with His life... His blood. The only reason we serve—the only reason we know how to serve, especially those disgusting ones that curl our lip and turn our stomach—is because we are empowered and inspired by a Lord who defined his Lordship in terms of servanthood.

We don't want to serve, most of us... especially in today's culture. We want to be served. We want the world to revolve around us. We want life to be convenient and comfortable for us, and we like to surround ourselves with people who make that possible, and let them care for us. What would it mean if we left today determined to serve? Especially, determined to serve those who normally serve us? How about if we promised ourselves that we will clean in front of our neighbor's driveway or teach Sunday school or take the worst assignment for a workmate that doesn't like you or leave someone a parking space or swallow our biting words or work in our Jubilee garden or change the diapers?

Or how about if we start with Mom? Stoop to serve the one who always serves us? How about if we promise ourselves that we are going to look for one thing she always does for us—that would never cross our minds to do because that's what she does—and do it? It would be great training!

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- **DIG DEEPER**
 1. What is the "yuckiest" act of service you have ever performed? Why did you do it?
 2. What is the humblest act of service by another person that you have ever received? How did that make you feel?
 3. Why do you suppose Jesus began His "cram session" in the Upper Room with this living lesson on humble servanthood? How does your Christian life reflect this example of Christ?