

# The Way of the Towel

## The Jesus Way

*"I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."*

(John 13:15)

Growing up I always loved historical movies, particularly those set in the Middle Ages in Europe. Knights, castles, epic jousts, and wars! I loved to imagine what it would have been like to live back then. One staple element of these movies is the relationship between the knights and their squires. Knights were these powerful warriors who typically came from the upper classes of society. They were one-man armies, the tanks of the Middle-Age battlefield. Along for the adventure were their trusted servants, the squires. In many cases squires had aspirations to become knights themselves, but for now they needed to do all the hard work necessary to ensure the success of their Knight.

In all these stories there was always a clear social hierarchy. At the top was the knight and lower the squire. For the vast majority of human history this has been the case. Roles were clear, the expectations were clear, lords ruled, warriors fought, farmers farmed, and servants served. The order and hierarchy were clear, and the expectation was that everyone stayed in their own lane.

We are in the second week of a new Sermon Series here called "The Jesus Way." As Christians we are called to live a life that reflects the values and teachings of Jesus. So, if we are going to do that well, we are going to need to be familiar with how Jesus lived, what He taught, and how He instructed His followers to behave in a complicated world. Each week we will look at a different story in the Gospel accounts to see how Jesus lived in different situations in life. This week we are going to look at what I'm calling "The Way of the Towel." Jesus' instruction on servant leadership, and what it means to be a leader in this new kingdom reality that He is ushering in.

What comes to mind when you think of a servant? Maybe it's something like the knight/squire relationship? Most people picture someone who is doing some relatively low skill task in exchange for money or goods. Servants are viewed as being at the bottom of the social pyramid. They are seen as lower than the people they are serving. So, we assume that if a person serves (or if we serve) that they will be lowering themselves and people will think lower of them. We often don't say that out loud, we think it, we make decisions based on it, it's just assumed.

This was most certainly the view of people in the first century world that Jesus was walking around and teaching in. There was a strict, expected, social hierarchy. At the top of society were the important people. Roman officials, Priests (including the High Priest), the Pharisees and Sadducees, the really important and wealthy people. And way down at the bottom were slaves and servants. Everyone knew their role. So, the assumption was that if a person served that they would be lowering themselves and people will think lower of them. But is this really true? Jesus didn't seem to think so.

As Jesus taught that serving isn't about position or skill, it's about attitude. People who live life the Jesus Way seek opportunities where they can build others up, instead of building themselves

up. One primary way of building others up is by selflessly serving them. This is part of what it means to live life “the Jesus Way”. He taught His disciples all about it in John 13:1-17. Read this passage for yourself. What stands out to you as you read? What would it have been like to be right there in the room with Jesus? How would you have felt as He began to wash your feet?

Knowing when this chapter of the Gospel of John takes place can really help with understanding what is going on. All of this is happening just before Passover; Jesus and His disciples have come to Jerusalem. This will be His last trip there. By the end of this week Jesus will be betrayed, falsely accused of being a trader and revolutionary, and put on trial. He will be abandoned by His closest companions and crucified on a crude wooden cross for all to see. We know ultimately this week will lead to Easter and the empty tomb, but there is a lot that will happen between now and then.

We read in verses 2-3: *“The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. 3 Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under His power, and that He had come from God and was returning to God.”* (Luke 13:2-3) How was Jesus going to react? How would a typical earthly king or ruler react? Anger? Violence? Retribution? Let’s continue reading and see what Jesus does! *“So, He got up from the meal, took off His outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around His waist. 5 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.”* (Luke 13:4-5)

He didn’t approach them as a ruler, as their master, as their teacher. Instead, He showed them a new way, the Way of the Towel. Washing someones feet in the ancient world was typically a job given to the lowest ranking of the servants. But here their leader, teacher, and lord had lowered Himself and taken on the role of a servant! How do they react? How would you react?

The disciples were understandably confused. This was culture-shattering stuff! The master who washes His disciples’ feet. The one who is not humbled by circumstances or society, but intentionally chooses to humble Himself for the sake of others. *“Jesus took off His outer robe, tied a towel around His waist, got down on His knees, and washed His disciples’ feet!”* That’s the Jesus Way! That’s the Way of the Towel.

Jesus taught His disciples all about how to serve others, how the master shall serve, how the greatest shall be the least, how they are to imitate His example if they truly wish to follow Him. Jesus taught them about how they will be bonded together not by hierarchy, but by sacrificial love. What does it look like to live a life following the teachings of Jesus? It’s going to look upside-down! Everything will be flipped on its head. The first shall be last. Masters shall wash their disciples’ feet. It will look like a king who comes to rule, not by being served, but by serving. A King who will serve even to the point of dying for those who follow Him! That’s just not the typical order of things, that’s the Upside-Down Kingdom of God

We, too, are called to live a “Upside-Down Kingdom” kind of life. What would it look like to humbly serve someone else this week? Not out of obligation, or “doing your good deed” but out of a desire to live out the teachings of Jesus? Maybe you will find yourself helping to shovel a neighbor's driveway or helping someone put chains on their car tires. Maybe it will look like going the extra mile and serving someone when there is zero expectation of serving.

Jesus said: *“ I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.”* (John 13:15)  
People of God, as you go out into the world go as people of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Go as  
ambassadors of the Upside-Down Kingdom of God. Love others, serve others, and point others to a  
Savior. 1 John 4:19: *“we love because Christ first loved us.”* Now go in peace to love and serve the Lord -  
Amen

Blessings,

Pastor Jon Dietrich