

Leader's Guide

Following Jesus

Pick Up the Towel

John 13:1-17

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Conversation Goal

To help group members recognize how their identity shapes their willingness to serve and be served, identify false beliefs that may be keeping them from following Jesus' example, and respond to the Holy Spirit with a practical step of humility, service, or receiving help.

Synopsis

In John 13, Jesus does something extraordinary: knowing that He has come from the Father, that He is returning to the Father, and that all authority has been entrusted to Him, He kneels to wash His disciples' feet. His willingness to serve flows from the security of His identity. Jesus has nothing to prove and nothing to protect.

This same security is available to us through our relationship with Christ. When we allow God, rather than our accomplishments, abilities, preferences, or other people's opinions, to define who we are, we become free to serve without needing recognition, step forward despite our inadequacies, and humbly receive help from others. Becoming like Jesus means allowing what we know about Him to reshape how we love and serve one another.

1. RECOGNIZE OUR IDENTITY

Who gets to tell me who I am?

Discussion Question

Jesus knew who He was, where He came from, and where He was going. How did that security allow Him to take on the role of a servant, and what can we learn from His example?

Teaching Point

Before John tells us what Jesus did, he tells us what Jesus knew. Jesus' identity was secure in His relationship with the Father. He didn't need to protect His status, defend His importance, or prove His worth. He was free to stoop low because serving couldn't diminish who He was.

We were also created to find our acceptance, security, and significance in God. But when we look to other people, accomplishments, abilities, or circumstances to establish our worth, we become vulnerable to fear, comparison, defensiveness, and the need for approval.

When God defines who we are, we no longer need other people or circumstances to continually reinforce our worth.

Follow-Up Prompts

- Where do people commonly look for acceptance, security, or significance?
- How might our behavior change when we feel overlooked, unappreciated, or inadequate?
- Why is it difficult to let God's opinion of us carry more weight than other people's opinions?
- What is the difference between knowing intellectually that we're loved by God and actually living from that truth?
- What helps you remain grounded in who God says you are?

Additional Scripture

- Genesis 1:26–28 — Created in God's image and entrusted with purpose.
- Ephesians 1:3–8 — Chosen, adopted, and redeemed in Christ.
- 1 John 3:1 — We are called children of God.
- Colossians 3:1–4 — Our lives are hidden with Christ in God.

2. FREE TO STOOP

What am I unwilling to lay aside?

Discussion Question

How can our need for recognition, comfort, or having things our way keep us from humbly serving others?

Teaching Point

Jesus, the One with all authority, willingly performed a task normally reserved for the lowest servant. He didn't lose anything by serving because His identity wasn't dependent on maintaining His position.

Sometimes we resist serving because we believe we've already done enough, that a particular task is beneath us, or that our preferences deserve priority.

Preferences aren't inherently wrong. But when our preferences become demands, they can prevent us from loving and serving the people Jesus has placed around us.

Spiritual maturity doesn't require us to stop having preferences. It means those preferences no longer control our willingness to love others.

Follow-Up Prompts

- What are some ways a sense of entitlement can quietly influence our willingness to serve?
- How can we tell when a preference has become something we're holding too tightly?
- Why is serving without recognition sometimes more difficult than serving publicly?
- When have you seen someone set aside personal comfort or preference for another person's benefit?
- Is there a situation where God may be asking you to value someone else's needs above your own preferences?

Additional Scripture

- Philippians 2:3–8 — Consider others above yourselves and have the mindset of Christ.
- Mark 10:42–45 — Greatness expressed through service.
- Romans 12:10–11 — Honor one another and serve the Lord.
- 1 Corinthians 10:23–24 — Seek the good of others.

3. FREE TO STEP FORWARD

What if I'm not good enough?

Discussion Question

Sometimes we hesitate to serve because we believe we aren't qualified, gifted, or capable enough. How can insecurity keep us from responding to something God may be calling us to do?

Teaching Point

Not all resistance to serving comes from pride or entitlement. Sometimes we hold back because we're afraid of failure, rejection, or disappointing someone.

We tell ourselves:

- Someone else could do it better.
- I don't have anything meaningful to contribute.
- What if I get it wrong?

There is wisdom in recognizing our gifts and limitations. But there is also a difference between healthy discernment and allowing fear to make our decisions.

Our usefulness to God isn't dependent on our perfection. When our identity is rooted in Christ, we can step forward without needing to prove that we're capable of doing everything well.

We serve because God has called us, not because we have something to prove.

Follow-Up Prompts

- How can insecurity sometimes look like humility?
- What's the difference between recognizing a genuine limitation and allowing fear to hold us back?
- Why do we sometimes assume that God can only use people who are especially gifted or confident?
- Where have you seen God work through someone's willingness rather than their ability?
- Is there something you've sensed God inviting you toward but have hesitated to pursue?
- What might change if you trusted God with the outcome rather than worrying about your performance?

Additional Scripture

- 2 Corinthians 12:9–10 — God's power is made perfect in weakness.
- 1 Corinthians 12:4–7 — The Spirit gives gifts for the common good.
- Exodus 4:10–12 — Moses' insecurity and God's response.
- Ephesians 2:10 — Created in Christ for good works.

4. FREE TO RECEIVE

Why is it sometimes harder to be served?

Discussion Question

Peter resisted Jesus' attempt to wash his feet. Why can receiving help, care, or service from others require just as much humility as offering it?

Teaching Point

Peter couldn't understand why his Lord would kneel to wash his feet. But Jesus told him that unless he allowed Jesus to wash him, he could have no part with Him. Before Peter could imitate Jesus' service, he had to receive what Jesus was offering.

We sometimes struggle with receiving because we believe we should be capable, independent, or strong enough to handle things ourselves. We don't want to be a burden or let anyone see our weakness.

But Christian community isn't made up of people who never need help. We need Jesus' grace, and we need one another. Allowing someone to serve us doesn't make us less valuable. It gives another person an opportunity to express Christ's love through their gifts.

Sometimes humility means kneeling to serve. Sometimes it means sitting still long enough to be served.

Follow-Up Prompts

- Why do some people find it easier to give than to receive?
- What fears or assumptions might lie underneath our reluctance to ask for help?
- How does receiving care challenge our desire to be self-sufficient?
- What might we unintentionally communicate when we continually refuse help?
- How does allowing others to serve us strengthen Christian community?
- Where might God be inviting you to acknowledge a need and let someone else help?

Additional Scripture

- John 13:6–10 — Peter must allow Jesus to wash him.
- Galatians 6:2 — Carry one another's burdens.
- Romans 12:4–8 — Members of one body with different gifts.
- 1 Corinthians 12:21–26 — Every member needs the others.

5. PRACTICE HUMILITY

What will I do with what Jesus has shown me?

Discussion Question

Jesus told His disciples, “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” Where might the Holy Spirit be inviting you to put Jesus' example into practice this week?

Teaching Point

Jesus didn't simply teach His disciples about humility. He demonstrated it, and then He told them to follow His example. The goal of discipleship isn't simply to admire Jesus' character or agree with His teaching. It's to increasingly become like Him. That might mean serving in a way that goes unnoticed, setting aside a preference, stepping into something that feels intimidating, or allowing someone else to help us.

We don't have to prove our worth through what we do, and we don't have to protect our worth by avoiding what feels uncomfortable. Our identity is already secure in Christ. The question is whether we will trust that truth enough to act on it.

Follow-Up Prompts

- Which of the three freedoms - stoop, step forward, or receive - most challenges you right now?
- What might God be asking you to surrender?
- Is there a particular person you could serve this week?
- Is there an opportunity you've been avoiding because you feel inadequate?
- Do you need to ask someone for help or allow them to care for you?
- What is one specific action you can take in the next seven days?
- How can this group encourage or support you as you respond?

Additional Scripture

- James 1:22–25 — Be doers of the Word.
- 1 John 3:16–18 — Love with actions and truth.
- Galatians 5:13 — Serve one another humbly in love.