

Ready for Love

Listos! Are You Ready? Pt. 5

We've been talking this fall about being *listos* – being “ready” for what God wants to do through us in the world. Now the entirety of John chapters 13–17 was Jesus' last training session with his disciples before he died – it's the night before he's going to die. So of course, he's trying to get them ready to be sent out into the world to represent him. So *how* do you do this? How do you show, in a nutshell, what you're all about, and what they have to be all about? That was the challenge before Jesus, “How do I do that?” And what he does is...he washes their dirty feet!

Now, of course, you say, “Well, that's interesting. What does that mean?” Well, later on in chapter 13 - we're going to get there in a couple of weeks - **John 13:34**, he says, “*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*” And we say, “Oh, so that's what it means, well why didn't he just say so?”

You know, the great Southern Gothic writer, Flannery O'Connor was once asked about one of her short stories. And they asked her, “Could you just boil it down into a nutshell? What does it mean? How would you, in one sentence, explain what the story

means?” And she said, “If I could boil it into a sentence, I wouldn't have had to write the story.”

In fact, you can't boil a story into a single sentence. Because generally speaking, what's great about a story, or in this case, a metaphor - he washes their dirty feet - Jesus is giving them, not a *proposition* – that's “Love one another as I have loved you” - he's giving them a *picture*, and as we all know, a picture's worth 1000 words. At least it was before AI, right?

Actually, it's worth more than that, because a proposition is nice and clear and concise. Okay, “love one another as I have loved you”. But by washing their feet it thickens the narrative. You're not going to ever forget that. You could reflect on it and meditate on it and think about it for the rest of your life - and by the way, you should - and get more and more things out of what it means, who Jesus was, and if you're a Christian what it means to represent him in the world.

And that's why we are spending three weeks just on the foot washing narrative. And this morning we will come to the end of it. So let me read you the text and then we'll see what we can learn from this wonderful story. This is **John 13:12–17...**

“When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. 13 “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. 14 Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. 15 I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. 16 Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”

Ok, there’s the narrative, now let’s think of it like this. You know how changing emphasis can change meaning? Oh yes. “Let’s *eat*, Grandpa.” Versus, “Let’s eat *Grandpa*.” What if we did that here? Jesus washed their dirty *feet*. Jesus *washed* their dirty feet. *Jesus* washed their dirty feet. And when you shift the emphasis here’s what we’re going to learn. That the love that Jesus is calling us to is not just attraction, it’s *action*. It’s not just giving, it’s *investing*. And it’s not out of our emptiness, but it has to be done out of a *full heart*. And only when you understand those three things, do you really understand the kind of love that Jesus is calling all Christians to. So let’s get started.

First of all, this is showing that **The love that Jesus calls us to is not just attraction, it’s action.** What do I mean by that? All right, he washes their *feet*. There’s a lot of ways you can take care of somebody, by the way. If you watch Downton Abbey, there’s all these valets and ladies’ maids, and they’re all helping the Lady and the Lord get ready, and there’s lots and lots of rather pleasant and, you know, congenial ways to do that.

But that’s not what Jesus is doing here. He doesn’t say, “as I have fixed your hair, so you should fix one another’s hair”. He doesn’t say that, why? Well, that’s kind of pleasant. But what he’s saying is, as I put my face right up against your dirty feet, so you should wash one another’s feet.

Now, what are feet? Well, if you’ve been here for a few weeks - I hope you have - you know that washing dirty, stinking feet in that walk-about culture was repulsive. It’s not like fixing somebody’s hair. It’s repulsive. And it’s not only that culture, by the way. According to *Cosmopolitan Magazine* – I looked it up, I don’t subscribe! – 67% of women said the most unattractive part of their body was their feet. And so when Jesus says wash one another’s feet - not fix one another’s hair, or iron one another’s shirts - here’s what he’s saying.

You don't just love people that you're attracted to, that you find attractive. You know, our culture essentially, almost defines love as being attracted. If you see someone that you have a desire to be with, we love them. "I love you; I want to be with you." There's a running gag in my family that I am in love with Scarlett Johansson. Well, I don't *know* Scarlett Johansson, how could I be *in love* with her? Now, am I *attracted* to Scarlett Johansson? Yes...yes, I am...I'm sorry, where were we!

Jesus is trying to correct that right off the bat. He says, "the way I define love, not only *can* you do it with someone who you're not attracted to, but in fact, you *ought* to do it to all kinds of people you don't find attractive." And once you understand that love is something you do for somebody that is completely detached from attraction, you are starting to get closer to what Jesus says love is, rather than what the culture says love is.

What do we mean? Well, when I say "attracted", I'm not just talking about romantic attraction. You get attracted to people because of their success, or because of their power or their connections or their intelligence, or even, you're attracted to somebody who just has a warm, wonderful, sunny disposition that makes everybody feel great when you're around them. So you're attracted to people for these various assets. Why?

And here's what it means to be attracted. Every one of us, all human beings, we're just a big bundle of needs. We need approval, we need power, we need comfort, we need control, we need all kinds of things. And when the human soul senses a person out there who's got the ability to meet some of those needs, then you *hungrily* make a beeline for them, and you call that "love". But is it? C.S. Lewis in *Screwtape Letters*, has a very interesting line where he says, "In human life we have seen the passion to dominate, almost to digest, one's fellow; to make his whole intellectual and emotional life merely an extension of one's own...On earth this desire is often called "love". In Hell I feign that they recognise it as **hunger.**"

See, very often when we say, "I feel love toward you" what it really means is "Being around you makes me feel better about myself. Being around you makes me feel smarter, happier..." That's the commodification of relationship. How is that "love" any different from T-Mobile or AT&T? "Oh we *love* our customers!" Sure you do...as long as I pay my bill on time and make plenty of expensive upgrades.

Our culture basically gets you to believe love means feeling attracted to people who will meet your needs. And Jesus says “No! Love is washing dirty feet.” Love is something you can do for people who not only aren’t attractive, but who are positively *unattractive* to you...and you can do that. Why? Because here’s what love is, “Real love is not ‘you meet my needs’, real love is ‘I’m going to meet your needs’”. Real love is not “you complete me”. Love is asking, “What will it take to complete you? What do you need from me?”

Or another way to put it is this, there’s two operating principles for the human soul. One is, your life for mine. I’ll be in a relationship with you as long as it meets *my* needs. We live in a culture that that actually *teaches* everybody to do that in a million ways. Don’t get into a relationship unless it’s fulfilling you, unless it’s helping you reach your goals. If it’s not, you pull out because that’s the *consumer* model - your life for mine. Your life to fill my needs. But then Jesus is saying “No, that’s not the operating principle of the love I’m calling you to. The operating principle of *covenant* love is my life for you - my life to meet your needs”.

And deep down we all know that the covenant model is greater than the consumer model. Think about how a child is born and grows into healthy adulthood. You know, the only way a child grows into a healthy adult is if some parent, or parents, have essentially *died* to their own convenience, *died* to control their own time

- they’ve laid down their life. I mean, parenting is just one sacrifice after another sacrifice after another sacrifice after another sacrifice.

You know that. In fact, if you are someone who grew up without somebody saying “my life for yours” - sacrificing *their* agenda, sacrificing *their* emotion, sacrificing *their* time and *their* convenience, maybe in many cases, sacrificing their career - if you didn’t grow up with some parent sacrificing all those things for you, you’re suffering right now, and you’re going to suffer for the rest of your life in some ways. Why?

Because when you say, “my life for yours”, it *feels* like a death...but it leads to life. So for example, let’s just consider a person who you don’t particularly like - you find them very irritating - but *nobody* likes them, *everybody* finds them irritating. And this person is having a problem, and they want to come over and talk to you for an entire morning or afternoon. So what do you say? Now, the normal way, of course is “No, I won’t be home. No, I’ll never be home. No, I’ve moved to another continent. What a shame! No, the internet’s down over here on this continent.” Or even if the person shows up, you just telegraph to them by your attitude that you really don’t want to hear it.

So that is looking out for your own needs; and that feels like life – you are not inconvenienced - but it spreads death. That person experiences the death of not having anybody who’s going to listen to them when they’re in their moment of great need. And in fact, you’re spreading death into *your own* heart because you become hard-hearted.

But what if this person that’s very irritating, that you really don’t want to spend time with, they come, and you sit down and you spend a long time with them? Weeping with them, praying with them, you know, giving up your morning. You know what, it feels like a death, right? Yes, you’re dying, and yet it spreads life. It makes *you* more like Jesus who lived on the basis of “my life for yours”.

It spreads light to *the person* because it’s life giving to have a friend, to have love. You see? And Jesus says, look, the very idea that you love people you’re attracted to because you’re getting something out of it, there’s two ways to go. One is “My life is my own, and everything has to meet my needs.” The other is, “my life for yours.” Now, boundaries is another sermon, ok? I’m talking about *one* social extreme at the moment. There’s always a tension along the emotional spectrum.

But in general, the more you do “my life for yours”, the more you experience death, but it leads to life. And the more you say “my life first, my needs are first” you experience life, but it leads to death. And therefore, the first point is this. The love Jesus calls us to is not just attraction, but action. It’s serving the interests of another person rather than your own, whether you get anything out of it or not. So that’s the first part of the definition. And it’s something not only that you *can* practice with people you’re not attracted to, but you especially *ought* to. That’s how Jesus followers are spreading life in the world.

Number two though, we said not only that Jesus washes dirty *feet*, but he *washes* dirty feet. And that leads to my second point. My second point is, **The love Jesus calls us to is not just giving, it’s investing.** Now here’s what I mean by that. You could go to the opposite mistake. See, the first mistake is that love is basically an emotional thing. When I feel attraction for somebody, I want to be with them, they meet my needs...that’s real love. And Jesus says, “Yeah, no, that’s actually hunger.” That’s a form of hunger in which you’re basically not loving *them*, but you’re loving yourself *through* them by making them a commodity to meet your needs. Congratulations, you’re a vampire!

But the second mistake you could make, you go the other extreme, and you could say, “Oh, okay, so love is just serving people. Just serving them, just doing what they need, just making your sacrifice. Punch the clock, check the love box. Okay!” Then it’s really just a matter of the will.

And I’ve heard people argue, and say, “Well, you know, the Bible actually commands us to love, and you can’t command an emotion.” You know, somebody cannot command you to feel an emotion. They can only command an action; so when God commands you to love one another, when Jesus Christ commands you to love one another, he can’t be talking about the *heart*, he must be talking about the *will*. And therefore, love is simply just meeting the needs of other people out of a sense of duty. Is that right?

Now, by the way, anyone who’s been in a love relationship knows that there *are* times in which you meet the needs of the other person when you don’t feel like it. *Lots* of times, actually. In fact, as I just said, if parents didn’t do that, if parents didn’t meet the needs of their children when they don’t feel like it, we’d all be dead. Anyway, the point is that, yeah, sometimes of course, you have to, you know, serve, even when you don’t feel like it.

But if *ultimately* your service to other people doesn’t engage your heart, that actually *doesn’t* fulfill your duty. Yes, you’re supposed to fulfill your duty, but to *never* feel a heart investment in someone is not actually fulfilling your duty. Why? Because you’re supposed to *care* about the effect of your service on the person’s life. What do I mean by that? Well, Jesus doesn’t just encounter the feet, he *washes* them. He washes them. And if you remember, if you were here a couple of weeks back, we said this is symbolic of what? Of his salvation!

Remember when he came to Peter and Peter said, “You will never wash my feet!” And Jesus says, “If I don’t wash you, you have no part in me”, which means you can’t inherit my life. So when Jesus says, “unless I wash you, you can’t have eternal life”, he doesn’t mean literally unless I wash you. It means what? The foot washing, the dirt is *sin*.

And what Jesus is saying is “I’m not just trying to serve you, I’ve got a goal for you. I want to see you clean. I want to see you bright. I want to see the dirt off your soul, the stuff that darkens your heart. The self-centeredness, the cruelty, the anxiety, all the things that are wrong about you - your soul - I want to see you clean and bright and brilliant.”

“I want to see you glorious. I want to see you joyful. I want to see you loving. I want to see you humble. I want to see you filled with great life, and love.” See that’s his goal. And we know he had that as a goal for us. It says in **Hebrews 12:2**, it says that Jesus, “*For the joy set before him he endured the cross...*”

And in the Isaiah passages about the suffering servant, in **Isaiah 53:11**, it says about the suffering Messiah, “*After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.*” In other words, Jesus has a vision for what you and I can be, and he gets excited when he sees that. And he says, “Yes, I’m doing, I’m sacrificing, I’m serving, and I’m getting nothing out of it right now. I’m going to go to the cross, I’m going to be tortured, I’m going to put the death. I am serving you in such a way that I’m going to lose everything.”

But guess what? “I’m excited about what this is going to do for you. I’m filled with joy when I think about what’s going to happen.” Now, is that how *you* think about how you serve people? C.S. Lewis has a tremendous and important sermon called *The Weight of Glory*. You can find it online, and by the way, I hope you do, it’s a good read. At one point, he says if you’re a Christian, then you believe that we’re not just bodies but we’re souls, right? We also have souls, and those souls go on forever.

And his argument is basically that every time a person operates on the basis of “your life for mine” - me first, my needs first - every time you do that, it makes you more like Satan, who lives on the basis of *power*. His operating principle is to digest people. “I will use you to build myself up.” It’s how a lot of people live in Austin. Basically, my job is to get up that ladder, and if it means taking credit for something that my colleagues or my subordinates have done, I’m going to do it. If it means, you know, elbowing people away to get up, I’m going to do it. So that’s how Satan works.

Meanwhile, Jesus’ life is self-emptying - “my life for yours”, I’m going to sacrifice for you. And so in every one of your relational encounters, you’re pushing people toward Christ or Satan, got that? And the consequences are enormous. So C.S. Lewis says, “It’s a serious thing to remember that the dullest and the most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long, we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations... There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations – these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. (*The Weight of Glory*, 45-46)

With every relational encounter you are ever so slightly nudging people in one direction or another. Towards sacrifice or toward selfishness. Towards “my life for yours” or “your life for mine.” Towards Jesus or Satan. And then he goes and says, “It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all love, all play, all politics.” (46)

You see what he’s saying? He’s echoing Jesus who says, “I want you to base your relationship with other people on what I’m doing right now. I’m washing their feet. I have a vision for what they can be – clean and radiant.” You never just in a kind of dutiful way say, “Okay, time to serve the people.” No, you have a hope, a goal for that person. You want to see them grow, you want to see them develop, you want to see them become more like Christ somehow.

You want them to know the joy that happens when *you* love and serve other people, and how that bonds you with other people, and how that turns you into a softhearted, tenderhearted, wise and loving person. You don’t want them to know the hard-heartedness that comes as they look out for themselves, and they exploit other people, and they become more and more alienated from people as the years go by. You don’t want that. And as soon as you say this is what I want...see you’re washing their feet, I want to see the dirt go away. Are you just giving a sandwich to the homeless or are you

engaging the dignity of the very image of God? When you have a goal for them like Jesus has a goal for you, that will engage your heart.

And that actually is the third and final point. The love Jesus calls us to; it’s not just attraction, it’s *action*. And it’s not just dutifully giving people things, it’s *investing* in who they are and who they become. So finally, **it’s not out of our emptiness, but it has to be done out of a full heart.** Let’s wrap up by talking about how we actually do this. Because – all cards on the table – this is *very* hard to do!

Remember the last emphasis, it’s not just *washing*...it’s not just *feet*...it’s *Jesus* who is doing the washing. My generation will remember the “Be Like Mike” commercials. Bad news, it’s not the shoes. You *can’t* be like Mike. *Maybe* LeBron can be like Mike. But even Michael Jordan, he had the “flu game”, but he never had a “raised from the dead game”! So how can we be like Jesus?

This is problematic. I mean, every time I ever preach a sermon, *ever*; on one of these kind of texts – and there are so many that say, “Love one another like this, love your enemies, love your friends, love your brothers and sisters, love your neighbor as yourself” - there’s all these things the Bible says about love. And when you’re done reading any of those texts, you sit there and say, “I can’t do this!”

But here's *why* it's so hard. It's all simple economics, folks. Do you know what I mean by simple economics? You can't give a lot of money away if you don't have enough money to even buy food and eat. You can't give a lot of money if you yourself can't even eat, it's simple economics! And you can't give love away like this if you're empty inside! The reason why most of us have to basically only love attractive people is because we need to love people who will make us feel good about ourselves. You know why? Because we're empty, we're not full. We're not *filled*.

Romans 5:5, Paul says, "...*God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.*" He's talking to Christians. Is that true for you? See, that's not just intellectual consent – "I believe that God loves me, because the Bible says..." No, it's more than that. When it says that 'by the Holy Spirit, the love of God floods your heart', he's talking about an experience of the heart, a sense of fullness.

And without that fullness, you cannot be generous with your love. If you're empty, if God's love is not real to you, I can tell you this, you will only be able to love people who love you back and make you feel good. In other words, you have to always be in a *profit* relationship. You've got to always be in love relationships where you're getting about as much, or at least a little more than what you're giving. Cost-benefit

analysis. You're making a profit. Why? Because you're empty!

If you were going to really *give* money away, without regard for anything, just give it away, give it away! You'd have to have almost an infinite stream of free money coming to you all the time. And if you're going to love the way Jesus Christ says you should love, you're going to need an infinite stream of absolutely free unconditional love coming into your heart all the time. And guess what? Jesus says, 'I can give you that'.

Now there's two things you have to get, there's two things you must do. The one is you must have faith in Jesus Christ. Look, it's one thing to read this text and say, "Isn't that wonderful, Jesus washing the feet of the disciples? What a great example he is." It's *not* a great example. I'll tell you what, it's a *crushing* example because nobody can do it.

The key is not to see him washing other people's feet as an example. The key is, have you ever seen him washing *your* feet? Have you ever looked down as it were - speaking metaphorically, of course - but have you ever looked down and realized that the Lord of the Universe humbled himself, became a human being, went to the cross for you?

See, you've got to be careful. If Peter said – remember? - “What are you doing down there? I don't want you washing my feet. I'm not that bad.” We've said that in a way, Peter represents all the people in the world, who are frankly too proud to admit the Gospel is true. Here's what the Gospel says; the Gospel says you're a sinner and you're really more sinful than you think, because you not only do bad things - everybody admits they do bad things - but even the good things you do, you do for selfish motives, generally out of hunger to use other people, and therefore you're so sinful, that nothing less than the death of the Son of God can save you.

Now, if you don't believe that, if you say, “I'm not that bad”, then you've never seen Jesus at your feet. Never seen him washing *your* feet, going to the Cross in order to cleanse *you*, and therefore you'll never get this stream of infinite love. You've got to believe, you've got to have faith in him, and as you put your faith in him, it's astounding! You suddenly say, “My Lord, what are you doing at my feet, washing my feet? How could you do this? You've come all this way, you've humbled yourself like this *for me!*” Has that happened to you? Have you put faith in Christ? That's the first thing you've got to do.

But here's the second thing. You've got to relish the love of God in Jesus Christ. See, it's the head *and* the heart. The will *and* the emotions. It's what prayer is about, it's what worship is about. That love has to get *real* to you - really real. How do you do that? Well, there's a million ways. See every time you pray, every time you get into a passage of Scripture, every time you sing a song to him, what you're doing is you're saying, “Oh, Holy Spirit, flood my heart with your love so that I can live the life that you've called me to, the life of love.”

You can believe through propositional statements and dogma – the way that Paul often taught. But to *relish*, you need stories. That's the way Jesus often taught. This summer, Pastor Connor took us through a number of parables. Stories capture the heart. So let me end with one. James Montgomery Boice, in his commentary on Romans, tells the story of a young Russian soldier - the son of a close friend of Czar Nicholas I – in fact because of this connection the young man got set up in a cush job as a battalion treasurer. He was tasked with managing the crown funds and dispensing wages to the troops.

And he started well, but the young man had a fondness for gambling. And he hit a rough patch, but he knew it was just temporary bad luck, and he began covering his losses by “borrowing” from the army treasury. It was just a few rubles after all. He'd pay it back soon.

Well, time passed until one day the young soldier heard that a government auditor was coming the next day to examine the books. He sat down and added up what he had taken and to his shock it was a huge amount. He emptied out his own resources, subtracted it from what should have been in the royal account, and noted the great discrepancy in a ledger. Under the amount due, he wrote: “A great debt; who can pay?” He couldn’t, and rather than face the terrible dishonor, he resolved to kill himself with his revolver at midnight. But as he waited, he began to nod off – in his despair he’d gotten quite drunk - and so fell fast asleep.

Now, as it happened, Czar Nicholas would from time to time, dress himself in a common soldier's uniform and make his way around incognito to assess the state of the troops. And that very night he was walking through the barracks when he saw a light on in the staff offices. He tried the latch, opened the door, and there was the young officer who he recognized immediately, asleep. And he saw the books open, and he saw the money out, and he saw the revolver on the table, and when he read the writing in the ledger, the whole thing became clear in a moment.

But as he read the young man’s note – instead of anger at the betrayal – the king’s heart went out to him. And so the Czar picked up a pen, leaned over,

and under the entry, “a great debt, who can pay?”, he wrote one word, and then tiptoed out as quietly as he’d come in.

The next morning, the young officer woke with a start. Suddenly everything came back to him and with his head pounding he reached for the revolver. But as he did, he caught sight of his note where he had written “a great debt, who can pay?”...but to his astonishment, he saw that one word had been written underneath it. “Nicholas”. He fumbled through his desk and produced an official document with the king’s signature. It was a match.

And he dropped the document as he was startled by a knock at his office door. Outside was a messenger from the Royal treasury with a bag of coins. Sent by his majesty Czar Nicholas the First. In the exact amount of the debt. And Boice ends the story like this. “Thus did the Lord Jesus Christ love us, and pay our great debt. Like the king, like the Tsar, he too has come down among us, in disguise, as a human being. And like the Tsar, he too has looked into the bottom of your heart and my heart, and he has seen the worst. And like that king, he too has signed His name to our bankrupt account. No wonder we sing:
“Jesus paid it all,
All to Him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain,
He washed it white as snow.”

Now, you have to think like that. You have to *meditate* on the pictures of the scripture – see Jesus kneeling at the table, see Jesus hanging on the cross - until the reality of God’s love washes into you, floods your heart, and creates that stream so that *you can* love one another as Jesus has loved us. Are you ready for love? Jesus has more than enough to give you.

Let’s pray...