

## **The Call to Missionary Service**

**John 13:1-17**

**By Ed Hartman**

You know if we're not going to sing the fourth verse at least let me read it to you because it's great! "Fierce may be the conflict, strong may be the foe, but the King's own army none can overthrow. Round His standard ranging victory is secure, for his truth unchanging makes the triumph sure. Joyfully enlisting, by Thy grace divine, we are on the Lord's side; Savior we are Thine!" That needs to be read and celebrated.

I'd like to invite you to take your Bibles and turn to John chapter 13. And as you're turning I'd like to ask you a question. Why do we have a Mission Conference every year? Of course you don't need to answer from where you're seated but could you give a brief, straightforward answer? And, "Because we always have one every year" doesn't count! You're probably familiar with the often quoted statement by John Piper who says, "Missions is not ultimate in the church, worship is. Missions exists because worship does not. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. Missions is a temporary necessity but one day, when the millions of God's people are gathered before the throne in unceasing and unbroken worship, missions will be no more, but worship will last forever." Do you know why we have a Missions Conference every year? Because we forget; we are forgetters. One man wrote it this way on a blog that I read some months ago. He said, make sure I quote this correctly - "The biggest obstacle to evangelism and missions is the belief that the Gospel has already been heard and the biggest obstacle to discipleship is the belief that the Gospel has been remembered."

The truth is, you and I are forgetters and we get the really important things and we put them kind of off to the side and the secondary things become really, really important. So we have a yearly Mission Conference to remind us of what has to be critically important to each one of us. Yes, it's an encouragement to missionaries who come and are reminded that we're standing with you, we're praying for you, we're supporting you, but it's fundamentally important for us to be reminded of what the battle is all about and why our lives are and continue to be a battle. And so I've been asked to take several Sunday evenings to talk about that battle, that calling, not just for others to go to distant places to be missionaries, but what is your calling and my calling here to be missionaries. And to begin our study of that question we're going to look at John chapter 13. We'll read the first seventeen verses. This is God's Word:

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, Jesus rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do you 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." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you." For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean."

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."

This is God's holy and inspired, inerrant Word. We give thanks to Him for it. Let's bow together in prayer.

*Holy Spirit, we need You. We plead with You to open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts not simply to understand the truth, not simply to believe it, but to treasure it, to allow the truth to shape our lives, our loves, to determine our pursuits. We can't do this on our own but You can and we're asking You to do exceedingly, abundantly beyond all we can ask or imagine. You've placed Your calling upon us; now make us treasure that calling and pursue it not as an expression of our duty but as an expression of our deepest delight. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.*

Four words I'd like us to think about as we unpack this passage; very simple outline. You'll see in this passage a pattern, secondly a principle, thirdly a problem, and finally a power. We'll organize our thinking around those four words and my hope is by the time we come to the end of this study you'll understand

with much greater clarity what is God's missionary calling on your life today - all in anticipation not just of a Mission Conference but a life of pursuing that calling that God has placed upon you.

### **The Pattern for Missions**

So first of all, the pattern. The pattern is very straightforward. Jesus says in verse 15, "For I have given you an example that you also should do just as I have done to you." It's an example with a promise. Verse 17, "If you know these things you will be blessed if you do them." There's a pattern. It's a very straightforward example that Jesus identifies as one He is calling us to follow. "As I have done for you, so you are to do for one another." But it's a pattern not simply expressed in words; it's actually expressed in action. Because if you watch this scene, it unfolds almost as if it's in slow motion. Luke's gospel tells us that Jesus had sent His two innermost, the closest disciples to Him, to make preparations for this Last Supper, the Passover meal. He sent Peter and John. And they found the room just as Jesus had told them to expect it, they made the preparations, but something slipped through the cracks. In this kind of a meal there was supposed to have been someone already arranged to wash the feet of those who would be gathered for that meal. In that culture, as you well know, it was a social necessity, a cultural expectation, that someone would wash the feet of those who were gathered for that meal. You just would not sit down to that kind of an engagement without that having been done. It appears that they made arrangements for a basin and some water and a towel to be there, but maybe they thought, "We're the two closest disciples to Jesus, we've made the arrangements, surely one of the other ten will take it upon themselves to do this." But the meal is served, mouths are watering, the meal begins, and everyone's looking around and wondering who's going to do the deed. And nobody does. And there had to be some kind of awkward tension there but then it happens, almost as if in slow motion, Jesus Himself stands up and He slips off His outer robe and He grabs the towel that's there, wraps it around Him, and as mouths begin to drop open in disbelief, Jesus does what no one else there is willing to do.

### **Jesus, the Exemplar of a Servant**

Think about this - Jesus, the One who in the beginning made man out of dust, now is the only one willing to wash the dust off their feet. He deliberately and intentionally takes upon Himself the role of a servant. Michael Card wrote a song about that scene called "The Basin and the Towel." The first verse goes like this: "In an upstairs room a parable is just about to come alive. While they bicker about who's best with a painful glance, He'll silently rise. Their Savior, Servant, must show them how through the will of the water and the tenderness of the towel. And the call is to community, the impoverished power that sets the soul free, in humility, to take the vow that day after day we must take up the basin and

towel.” There’s the pattern, the example that Jesus sets.

## **The Principle for Missions**

But then there’s secondly a principle because the principle is so easily misunderstood and has to be articulated. Jesus led us to understand that it’s easy to misunderstand because He uses the word “understand” three times. You see it in verse 7. He says, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.” Verse 12, “Do you understand what I’ve done to you?” Now the reason we have to look at this carefully is because you can do a lot with that example. There are churches throughout our country and across the world where today, Christians, as part of their expression of worship, peeled off their shoes and stripped off their socks and they pulled out buckets of water and towels and they literally washed one another’s feet as an obedience to that command. Now you may shrug your shoulders and express some measure of relief that we don’t do that as part of our worship, but you know, we’re not too far away because while they compartmentalize their serving to their worship service, we’re inclined to compartmentalize our servicing to places where we might get credit for it. You know, we do service projects once a year. We go on a mission trip. Or we do our community service hours so that our resume looks better and we have a better shot of getting into the program that we’re hoping to get into. Jesus says, “I have set you an example that as I have done for you, so you must do for one another.”

## **Our Calling as Host in the World**

So what is the example? What’s the principle behind that? Well you see it very clearly when Jesus identifies who He is, and He says twice who He is. He says, “You call me Teacher and Lord,” in verse 13, “and so I am.” The next verse, “If I then, your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” Here’s the principle. Jesus, the honored guest at this meal, sets aside the position to which He’s entitled as the honored guest and He takes upon Himself the role as the host. Principle, here is it, if you remember nothing else remember this - if you belong to Christ, if by the blood that He shed on the cross your sins have been forgiven, by His perfect obedience you have been declared righteous so that you stand blameless before God, if you belong to Christ in that way, and here it is, you’re not a guest in the world, you’re a host. As a disciple of Jesus, your calling, your missionary calling, is not to be a guest in this world; your calling is to be a host. Now this is hard for us because the way we were raised in our families we were treated as guests by our mothers, most of us were. And then we grew up and began working. And in this culture in particular, and I didn’t see this so clearly until I lived in eastern Europe, but in this culture in particular we prize customer service. So when you walk into a hotel lobby someone very quickly says, “How may I serve you?” and you’re a guest. You walk into a restaurant and someone seats you and someone brings you something to drink

and a menu and says, "How may I serve you?" and you're their guest. You take your car to the mechanic with this problem that it's having and you expect the service manager to come out and say, "How may I help you?" And we're trained and we're led to believe that in this culture we're entitled to be treated as guests. And so when Jesus says, "If you belong to me you're not a guest in this world you're actually a host," now think about what that may mean in your life.

First of all what it doesn't mean - it doesn't mean the Martha Stewart, "Southern Living" kind of host where when you host someone they leave that experience saying, "Wow, she is such a wonderful hostess! I wish I could host people in my home like she does or like he does!" That's not what we're talking about. The kind of hosting we're talking about here is that when you fulfill your call to be this kind of host people actually feel not better about you but about your Redeemer and they're more inclined to say, "Wow" about Him and not about you. Think about what that might look like when you as a husband come home from work and your natural inclination is to walk in the door and expect your wife to come over and give you a big hug and say, "I'm so glad you're home! Let me serve you!" And while we don't say that out loud that that's our expectation, it's certainly the way we wish to be treated isn't it? You're allowed to nod! I do. But what would it look like if I drove in the driveway thinking, "I'm called to be a host and when I walk in the door I want to smile at my wife and say, 'What does it feel like to be you today? How can I serve you? How can I relate to you in such a way that Jesus becomes more precious to you not that I look better but Jesus becomes more precious?'"

What if you went to see that same mechanic and you're committed to get that noise to quit making that noise and you go in and you realize, "This guy's had a rough day. What would it look like to say, 'How are you? What's been going on in your world?'" Or when you go in that restaurant and you're looking forward to having a meal with someone you enjoy and the waitress takes forever to get to your table and then when you finally place your order and you wonder, "Why is it taking so long?" and it gets to your table and it's the wrong thing and you send it back and finally the right thing gets to your table and it's cold and as a guest you think, "There goes your gratuity!" but as a host you may be inclined to look at your waitress or your waiter and say, "You look like you're having a hard day. What's it feel like to be you today? I'm about to pray and thank God for our food. Is there something I can pray about for you?" And then do the unthinkable. Leave a gracious gratuity as a host, because you're not a guest in this world. A little aside here - I have to say this - if you ever pray before you eat a meal at a restaurant, don't ever leave a small gratuity because you're one to whom God has been immeasurably generous and we of all people on the planet ought to be generous whenever we're given an opportunity, don't you think? That's the end of that parenthetical comment!

The truth is you're not a guest in the world; you're a host. So the pattern is, Jesus says, "I've set an example for you, you're to follow this example, and now that

you know this you'll be blessed if you do it." That's the pattern. The principle behind it is you're a host, not a guest in this world.

### **The Problem for Missions**

Third, there's a problem. If you're like me it's a big problem because the problem is that there's a gap between the "ought to" and the "want to." I know what I'm supposed to do but I kind of don't want to. I'd much rather keep on living as a guest because it feels good to be served by others. It feels good when others make much of me rather than my making much of others. Doesn't it? And so there's this gap between the "ought to" and the "want to" - I just saw the clock! And sometimes there's an even larger gap between, "Okay, finally I've realized this is what I want to do, ought to do, but I don't know how. What empowers me to live in this way?" Because look, when you look at the gap and you realize, "I really can't do this. I don't know how to do this. I'm not even sure I want to do this" you need a new power.

### **The Power for Missions**

The power, that's the fourth part here, the power is what Jesus shows us in the way that He serves. Three things Jesus knew very clearly as He began to serve these disciples. It's actually a little bit awkward the way John writes this. Verse 3, "Jesus (comma), knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going back to God (comma)," and then he resumes it, "Jesus rose from supper, laid aside his outer clothes, and took on a towel." What did Jesus know at that time? What did Jesus know as He washed His disciples' feet? Three things - one, He knew His identity, secondly, He knew His destiny, third, He knew His authority. I'll run through this very quickly.

#### **Jesus Knew His Identity**

His identity says He knew that He had come from God, which doesn't simply speak of His origin because John says, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." Jesus knew who He was; there was no question in His mind as to His identity.

#### **Jesus Knew His Destiny**

Secondly, He knew His destiny. He knew that He was returning to God. When Paul speaks of this in Philippians 2 he talks about Jesus humbling Himself "even to death on the cross, and therefore," verse 9, "God exalts him highly and gives him a name that is above every name that is named." Jesus knew where He was going. He knew His identity, He knew His destiny, and third, He knew His authority.

## **Jesus Knew His Authority**

He knew that the Father had given all things into His hands. Matthew 28 - "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and live as hosts." By that authority that is already His and that He entrusts to us, not to wield but to serve.

## **Power for Missions: Knowing what Jesus Knew**

So what gives me the power to do what I'm not sure that I want to do, what I certainly know I can't do on my own? I have to know what Jesus knew. It's my being clear on my identity, my destiny, and my authority. What's my identity? Answer - Jesus. Jesus is my identity. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation." I belong. Our choir sang about it beautifully. They sang, "I am a child of glory, I am born from above. My soul is filled with love. I am eternally accepted through Jesus. I belong! I am rejoiced over with singing." This is my identity, it's who I am, and it frees me from trying to work it out so that others will serve me. If I know who I am in Christ I have a new freedom and a new power.

What's my destiny? Jesus is my destiny; where He is now I will one day be. 1 John chapter 3 John says, "Beloved, now we are children of God and what we will be has not yet been made known, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is." This is our destiny. One day we will be with Him. We know how this ends, right? If you've read the last chapter of the book or you've seen the last scene in the movie, everything else is lined up with how you know the story's going to end. We know what the last chapter says, right? We know our identity, we know our destiny, and we know our authority because the one who says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," also said, "And I will be with you always, even unto the end of the age." Always. That's our authority. This one who says, "I am with you always," also said, "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many." This is what we talked about the Sunday after Christmas, remember? This is where Jesus said, "I know you don't have the power to serve and to live as a host the way I'm calling you to. As a matter of fact, I know you probably won't even have the desire to do that because your inclination is to want to be served, to remain in that place where you feel entitled to remain. But if you'll allow Me to serve you, I'll give you a whole new power and a whole new desire to live as a host. If you'll allow Me to serve you, not to submit to your will or your authority but instead to empower you, to give you a resource and a heart to live as a host that is otherwise absolutely impossible to you."

Think about it, how long did it take Jesus to wash the feet of His disciples? I kind of don't think that Jesus kind of did it in a haphazard way. I suspect that when He

washed the feet of His disciples, twelve disciples, twenty-four feet, twenty-six if He washed His own after He washed theirs, my suspicion is that He did it thoroughly and that He looked them in the eye as He washed their feet. And even if He just took thirty seconds on each foot it probably took about fifteen minutes, right? I suspect He wanted to impress permanently on their minds what He was doing and why. And in those fifteen minutes or so, He unfolded before their eyes a one-scene parable of His own life, His whole life. Because think about it - as Jesus gets up from His rightful place at the supper table He's showing them that thirty-three years earlier He had gotten up from His rightful place in the throne room of heaven. Verse 4, as He lays aside His clothes, clothes that are rightfully His that defined Him as the Lord and the Teacher, the Master of that group, He's reminding them that thirty-three years earlier He had laid aside the glory of the position that was rightfully His. He wrapped Himself in a towel, the humble and exposed garb of a servant, just as thirty-three years earlier He had wrapped Himself in the body of a helpless and vulnerable baby. He poured out water to cleanse dust-encrusted feet just as in a few hours He would pour out His own lifeblood to cleanse sin-stained hearts. And then He rose to His feet, put on His clothes again, and returned to His rightful place at the table just as three days later He would rise again from the grave and be exalted to the highest place of heaven's glory.

See, this is not just a parable of Jesus' whole life and ministry; it's a pattern for ours. Where we leave the place that we assume is rightfully ours and we step into places that we'd really rather not go and we set aside the desire to be served and be treated as a guest so that we can live as a host because see, we're not the first. Jesus was the first one to do that and then He says, "Not only have I set an example for you to follow with a very clear principle, you're a host here not a guest, but I've done for you what you can't do for yourself and I'm going to continue doing through you what you can't do on your own." That's the beauty of the Gospel, isn't it? Jesus doesn't say, "I set an example, now go do it. End of story." He says, "I've set an example, I want you to do it, but watch Me; I'm going to do it through you."

I've been meditating on one verse, and I'll end with this, out of Isaiah 26 where Isaiah says, and I hope I quote this correctly, "For you will ordain peace for us for you have indeed done for us all our works." Whose works? It's our works. Who's done them? He has. This is the beauty of the Gospel. We're sent forth, it's our missionary calling to serve, to live as hosts not as guests and it's hard. Some places will feel like death; we'll talk about that, Lord willing, next Sunday evening. But Jesus says, "I will do it through you. I'm not sending you out on your own. I will be with you always, even to the end of the age, and in the process I'm going to call you to live as a host and I'm going to serve you to give you both the desire and the ability to carry it out." That's your missionary calling; it's mine as well. Let's pray together.

*Holy Spirit, we recognize that we can't do this on our own. You've set a high,*



*high calling, Lord Jesus. And yet not only have You set an example before us, You've promised to empower us to live out this calling. And so because You never go back on Your Word, we rest in You, we cling to Your promise, and with joy and with confidence we say, make it so, Lord Jesus, make it so. Make us to find our great joy and deep delight living as hosts in this world to which You've sent us - to our neighbors, our family members, our husbands, our wives, our children, our parents, co-workers, people we see throughout the day. Would You make us to find such great pleasure in the Gospel of Jesus Christ in which the message of His serving us is declared to our hearts that as we find pleasure in that message we would become the fragrance of that Lord Jesus to the people to whom we're called. And then grant us the great privilege of inviting many in to the family of believers alongside of whom we will sing the worth, the glory, the beauty, the praise of the Lamb for all eternity. We long for the day when we will see Him face to face and on that day be perfectly conformed to His image. Even so, come quickly Lord Jesus. Amen.*

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

*This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.*

*Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.*

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

#### **Subscribe to RPM**

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).