

# CHAPTER TEN

## THE TRUE SERVANT

*“To love or have loved, that is enough. Ask nothing further. There is no other pearl to be found in the dark folds of life.”*

*-Victor Hugo, Les Misérables*

Do you remember the story of Narcissus? In Greek mythology, Narcissus was the man who fell in love with his own reflection. He became so enamored that even the beautiful nymph known as Echo could not rouse him from his self-absorption. Tragically, Narcissus soon discovered that self-love is a one-way street. With no satisfaction to be had, Narcissus was condemned to pine away in quiet despair.

Today, Narcissus lives on in each one of us. We’ve become the “YOU” generation, where everything from our social media platforms to online delivery apps has been personalized to suit our needs. Much like Narcissus, we, too have become enamored with our own magnificence. Think about it: the very concept of a “selfie” would have been unthinkable to our grandparents’ generation. Today, they’re ubiquitous—and suffocating.

In David Brooks’ book *The Road to Character*, he observes that young adults are scoring higher scores on “narcissism tests” administered by trained psychologists. Subjects readily agree with statements like: “I am an extraordinary person” or “I like to look at my body.” On the surface, such sentiments may seem egocentric, even pathological. But as Brooks observes, they rise directly from the cultural mainstream:

“As I looked around the popular culture I kept finding the same messages everywhere: You are special. Trust yourself. Be true to yourself. Movies from Pixar and Disney are constantly telling children how wonderful they are. Commencement speeches are larded with the same clichés: Follow your passion. Don’t accept limits. Chart your own course. You have a responsibility to do great things because you are so great. This is the gospel of self-trust.”

The long-term effects of this gospel are sadly predictable. For some, the focus on “self-esteem” manifests itself in a kind of swaggering pride. We view ourselves as eminently “likable,” a term that itself reflects the way that social media forms a supply line to our ego. But self-interest doesn’t always lead to confidence. If some thrive on being “liked,” others live with the persistent fear of rejection. As Brooks notes, “we’re constantly seeking recognition, and painfully sensitive to any snub or insult to the status we believe we have earned for ourselves.” In other words, we expend all our energies seeking to maintain or defend our image. And it’s exhausting. After covering the New York Fashion

Show, Guy Trebay composed an article appropriately titled: “Look at Me; Look at Me; Please Look at Me!” After standing at the intersection of beauty and celebrity, his conclusion is devastating:

“Models do not think they are too skinny. Actors do not find themselves handsome. Stars claim not to know what all the fuss is about. Our crazy cultural obsession with the perfected surface has become so absolute that everybody ends up having to work off some obscure psychic debt.”

Centuries ago, our “obsession with the perfected surface” went by a different name altogether: *sin*. One of the ways that Martin Luther defined man’s sinful state was as the *homo incurvatus in se*—literally “man incurved upon himself.” At the root of our narcissistic impulse is a soul twisted inward upon itself. It’s no wonder that our quest for being “liked” is utterly at odds with genuine love. And it’s this same “incurvature of the soul” that sets you and I at such odds with our Creator. Can there be any real hope?

## FROM SELF-INTEREST TO SELF-SACRIFICE

In the previous chapter we noted that a shift has occurred in John’s biography of Jesus. John has concluded his description of Jesus’ public ministry, and now the camera zooms in on the final week of Jesus’ life:

“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.” (John 13:1)

John packs several important details in this simple introductory statement. First, it’s Passover, the most significant holiday on the Jewish calendar. As the next verse makes clear, Jesus has gathered with his 12 disciples to observe what seems to be a Passover meal. More significantly, Jesus is well aware that this is his *last* Passover. The hour that has dogged his heels throughout his life has arrived. That very night he would be betrayed and arrested, and on the next day publicly executed through crucifixion. So this is indeed Jesus’ “last supper,” his final words with his followers prior to his death. John leaves out many of the details covered by Jesus’ other biographers. Instead, he spends pages detailing Jesus’ “farewell discourse,” an extended meditation on the true nature of Christian discipleship. Fittingly, he begins with an object lesson that would leave his disciples flat:

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, 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. (John 13:2-5)

In an era before shoes or public sanitation, the act of washing someone’s feet was a supreme act of servanthood. In fact, washing feet was regarded as so demeaning that many servants would refuse to do this for their masters. This was an act reserved for the slaves and the commoners—the very

lowest of the low. For a superior to perform such an act for a subordinate would have been a violation of every known social custom—which explains Peter’s strenuous objection:

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." (John 13:6-11)

Peter can’t believe his eyes. Isn’t this the same Jesus that he’d seen heal the blind, raise the dead, and cross the storm-tossed sea? How was it possible that the Son of God could now be kneeling in the role of a mere Servant?

Indeed, everything about this is upside-down—and that’s precisely the point. If you arrived at someone’s home and a servant washed your feet, it was expected. If the master of the house washed your feet, it was a clear reversal of social custom. But if the God of the universe washed your feet, it was an act of pure grace. What Peter misses is the fact that the very next day, Jesus would commit an act that would cleanse him entirely. That’s the meaning behind Jesus’ statement about being “bathed.” True and lasting purity would come through the once-for-all sacrifice of the cross. But daily fellowship with God would demand regular check-ups, time devoted to periodic washings not dissimilar from having our feet washed.

By taking up the towel and becoming the true Servant, Jesus reminds us that there is a limit to our quest for self-cultivation. True and lasting flourishing cannot be found in self-improvement, self-interest, or self-righteousness. Rather, it would be found in the discipline of self-denial and self-sacrifice.

Again, that’s utterly backwards from our culture’s traditional way of thinking. But to follow in the way of Jesus means to learn to follow the way of a Servant. New Testament scholar N.T. Wright compares the way of Jesus to the disorienting world of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* series:

“When Lewis Carroll had become famous through his story *Alice in Wonderland*, he decided to follow it up with a second book in which both he and his readers would need to learn how to think inside out. In *Alice through the Looking Glass* he created a mirror-image world. In order to get somewhere in that world, you discover it’s no good trying to walk towards it; you’ll look up presently and find you’re further away than ever. In order to get there, you must set off in what seems the opposite direction. It takes a sustained mental effort to imagine all the ordinary activities of life working as in a mirror. If you’ve ever tried to cut your own hair, or trim your own beard, while looking in a mirror, you will know how difficult it is.”

Following Jesus means taking up the cross, it means finding new life by laying yours down. And as Jesus explains further, his example would serve as a call to radical, gospel humility.

## GOSPEL HUMILITY

Footwashing would have served a secondary purpose. To wash someone's feet could be a symbolic way of preparing them for a new identity or a new mission. Jesus seems to mean both. By washing their feet, he's reminding them of their new identity as purified members of his community, and he's also preparing them for a life of mission following his death and resurrection. He even tells them that his act of service is intended as an example for his people to follow:

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. (John 13:12-15)

Jesus, of course, understands that his example has been completely backwards in the eyes of his disciples. But he uses their shock to stress the importance of humility. If even their "Teacher" and "Lord" can commit an act of service, can't they surely do the same?

Humility is hard. It's hard because, as we noted, everything in our world screams at us to celebrate our own magnificence. In fact, very often we use the word "humbled" when in reality we mean its opposite: "proud." Harris Wittels observes that the world of social media has given rise to a new form of communication: the "humblebrag." We might say things like: "Very humbled to have received that new promotion!" or "I'm humbled by all the compliments I'm getting for my new dress!" These aren't humble statements at all. They're just another way of saying: "I'm successful" or "I'm attractive"—just cloaked in a veneer of false modesty that others can see through like cellophane. True humility, on the other hand, doesn't begin with self-confidence, but a kind of self-confrontation—a willingness to look at the depths of our souls and acknowledge our need not for adulation, but grace. British writer Henry Fairlie puts it this way: "If we acknowledge our inclination to sin is part of our natures, and that we will never wholly eradicate it, there is at least something for us to do in our lives that will not in the end seem futile and absurd."

Gospel humility acknowledges this tendency toward self-centeredness. But gospel humility isn't just about focusing on the negative. Gospel humility also awakens our minds to the reality that help has to come from outside of ourselves, and that the cross is where the God of the universe engaged in true, vivid confrontation with the darkest aspects of our own nature. Gospel humility is therefore about shifting our gaze away from our "glorious" achievements to the true glory of Jesus Christ himself. It's about leaning on *his* reputation rather than seeking to cultivate our own. As C.S. Lewis so famously put it, "true humility isn't thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less."

That can be hard, especially for those of us who fear that by humbling ourselves, we'll lose some of our precious social influence. This may surprise you, but you wouldn't be the first person to have this fear. The second-century preacher John Chrysostom explained that Jesus could only wield the influence that he did by first humbling himself and becoming a Servant:

"He erased the curse, he triumphed over death, he opened paradise. He struck down sin, he opened wide the vaults of the sky, he lifted our first fruits to heaven, he filled the whole world with godliness...He accomplished so many good deeds that neither I nor all humanity

together could set them before your minds in words...Before he humbled himself, only the angels knew him. After he humbled himself, all human nature knew him...Why, then, are you afraid that you will become less if you humble yourself?"

More specifically, Jesus' call to follow his example is a call to have greater influence in the world by participating in his mission:

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. I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, 'He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.' I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me." (John 13:16-20)

The more we pursue Christ's glory—and not our own—the more opportunities we will find to serve as Christ's ambassadors.

## LOVING THE UNLOVABLE

By now you've surely noticed Jesus' repeated references to Judas. While Jesus (and John) had earlier alluded to Judas' coming betrayal, for the first time it becomes plain that Judas was involved in the plot to kill Jesus, and that Satan himself played an influential role.

After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table close to Jesus, so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it." So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the moneybag, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the feast," or that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night. (John 13:21-30)

Amazingly, none of the disciples understood Jesus' obvious sign, choosing to believe that Judas had simply slipped out for an errand. Only later does John recognize the spiritual battle that had been raging. The final note that "it was night" is more than just a reference to the time of day. It's a symbolic way of portraying the way that Judas plunges into depravity and disbelief.

What's all the more amazing is that up until this point Judas had been part of the same meal as the other disciples. Yes; Jesus washed the feet of his own betrayer, a fact that shouldn't escape our notice.

Today, it's easy to love those who love us back. It's easy to love those who share our "tribe," whether that's part of our church or those who share our political concerns. But it's harder to consistently love those who rub us the wrong way or even go out of their way to insult us. But that's not real love, at least not according to Jesus' example. Yes; this kind of love demands vulnerability, and yes; like Jesus, this kind of love leaves us open to betrayal and heartache. But as C.S. Lewis so famously observed, the alternative is far, far worse:

"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give it to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries, lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that coffin—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell."

Love anyone with the kind of self-sacrificing love of Jesus, and you will discover that you are blessed by some, betrayed by others. But that's what makes love such a part of what makes us thrillingly *human*. Jesus loves the unlovable. He serves his own betrayer. And in so doing, he forms the basis of an entirely new command.

## THE NEW COMMAND

Once Judas departs, Jesus transitions from washing his disciples' feet to launching into the farewell discourse:

When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.' A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:31-35)

At first, we might think that Jesus' command is nothing new at all. After all, loving one's neighbor lay at the heart of Old Testament ethics (Leviticus 19:18). And if you're a skeptic, you might be thinking that every major religion teaches some basic truth about loving one another. What makes Jesus' command new—or at least fresh—is that he anchors it in his own example. "Love one another *just as I have loved you*." And how does Jesus love his people? First, remember how John opened this entire section: *he loved them until the end*. That included Judas, as we already noted. It also includes Peter with all his performative zeal:

Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered him, "Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward." Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." Jesus answered, "Will you

lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times. (John 13:36-38)

Jesus knew about Peter's betrayal just as surely as he knew about Judas. He loved them anyway. This only makes sense when we consider that love was in Jesus' very nature. To love someone with the heart of a servant means seeing them—and loving them—in the same way that Jesus has. Gospel love is about seeing a person as more than a collection of traits to be liked or disliked. Jonathan Franzen puts it this way:

“There is no such thing as a person whose real self you like every particle of. This is why a world of liking is ultimately a lie. But there is such a thing as a person whose real self you love every particle of. And this is why love is such an existential threat to the techno-consumerist order: it exposes the lie.... Trying to love all of humanity may be a worthy endeavor, but, in a funny way, it keeps the focus on the self, on the self's own moral or spiritual well-being. Whereas, to love a specific person, and to identify with his or her struggles and joys as if they were your own, you have to surrender some of yourself.”

The gospel invites us to surrender not just “some” of ourselves, but all of ourselves. The cross is a permanent, glaring reminder that deep down—at the most basic level—you and I are not wholly and consistently “likeable.” If you're married, your spouse can attest to this. Chances are, the longer your spouse gets to know you, the more they can pinpoint habits and actions that grate their nerves. But in a healthy marriage, they love you anyway. Jesus Christ doesn't just tolerate us. He loves us, loves us with a depth of love that only the agony of the cross could possibly measure. And when he goes there, the cross “sets [man] free of his inhuman hubris, to restore his true human nature. It makes the [incurved soul] once again open to God and his neighbor, and gives Narcissus the power to love someone else.” Do you want to be more fully human? More fully alive? You won't find this life through self-promotion, self-cultivation, or self-interest. You'll find it instead when you come to Jesus, when you accept his call to come and die and discover what it means to live and love with the same grace that he gives to each of us.