

## Aspiring to Slavery

John 13:12-17, 30-35

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### Sermon

Last time, we preached on John 13, the story of Jesus washing the feet of His disciples at the Last Supper. I don't know if you caught it, but in the middle of the message I read this verse:

Jesus says in John 13:13:

*"You call me teacher and lord [kupios means "master," literally one who owns you], and you are right, for so I am."*

Then He says this:

*"Truly, truly I say to you, a servant [doulas, which actually means slave; there is another word in Greek for just "servant"] is not greater than his master."*

Doesn't that kinda bug you?

There were something like 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire around the time of Jesus. The Greco Roman world ran on the institution of slavery, thus the world of the New Testament ran on slavery. Biblical scholar Karl Reinstorf writes, "The distinctive feature of the self-awareness of the Greek is the thought of freedom. The Greek finds his personal dignity in the fact that he is free.... In the slave, the free Greek would always see his own anti-type."

For Roman, Greek, and Jew, the very last thing you ever wanted to be was a slave, followed by perhaps a woman or child.

A slave was property with no legal status, no rights, and considered inferior by nature. Actually in Roman law, the father of each household (the *potestas*) had absolute authority over everyone in his household—women, children, and the slaves that he owned. People were born into slavery, sold by parents into slavery, or captured by pirates or soldiers in a war and made slaves. Slaves: the very last and least.

You know, less than 150 years ago in this country you could legally buy a person—a slave. It was only 40 years ago that Ruby Bridges would walk to school escorted by Federal Marshalls as thousands of white people screamed things like, "We'll kill you!" Remember, we talked about Ruby just a few weeks ago.

Today slavery is illegal in the United States of America, yet some would argue there are millions and millions of socio-economic slaves, like undocumented migrant workers. Well, whatever the society—Jewish, Greek, Roman, or American, the last thing anyone inspires to be is a slave. Slaves aren't free and therefore aren't happy and therefore aren't blessed. So clearly the Bible speaks out against slavery...right?

I Peter 2:18: "*Oiketai* (house slaves), be subject to your masters with all respect, not only the good and gentle, but also the unjust...." Wow!

Let's try Paul, the apostle of freedom. Ephesians 6:5: "Slaves [*doulas*], obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart as you would Christ." Ouch! Paul even sends a runaway slave Onesimus back to his master Philemon. That's what the book of Philemon is all about.

Well, now, that's really troubling. So in seminaries, colleges, and classrooms, these are the verses people use to say, "Look, you can't trust all that stuff in the Bible. The Bible advocates slavery, and clearly slavery is thoroughly unjust."

Evangelicals and conservatives do their best to explain these verses away. We translate "slave" as "servant"—stuff like that. But it's abundantly clear that at least in the New Testament there is no place where slaves are told to claim their rights and rebel. But there are many places where they are told to submit. And that fact has been used to justify some unspeakable evil. That's all pretty confusing for us empowered, modern, American Christians...especially when you consider that the Old Testament is all about an entire nation of slaves, led by God, on a journey from bondage to freedom—a Promised Land, the land of the free.

Well, Jesus and the New Testament seem rather sketchy on the whole topic. So thank God for the Declaration of Independence, right?

In Congress, July 4, 1776

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.

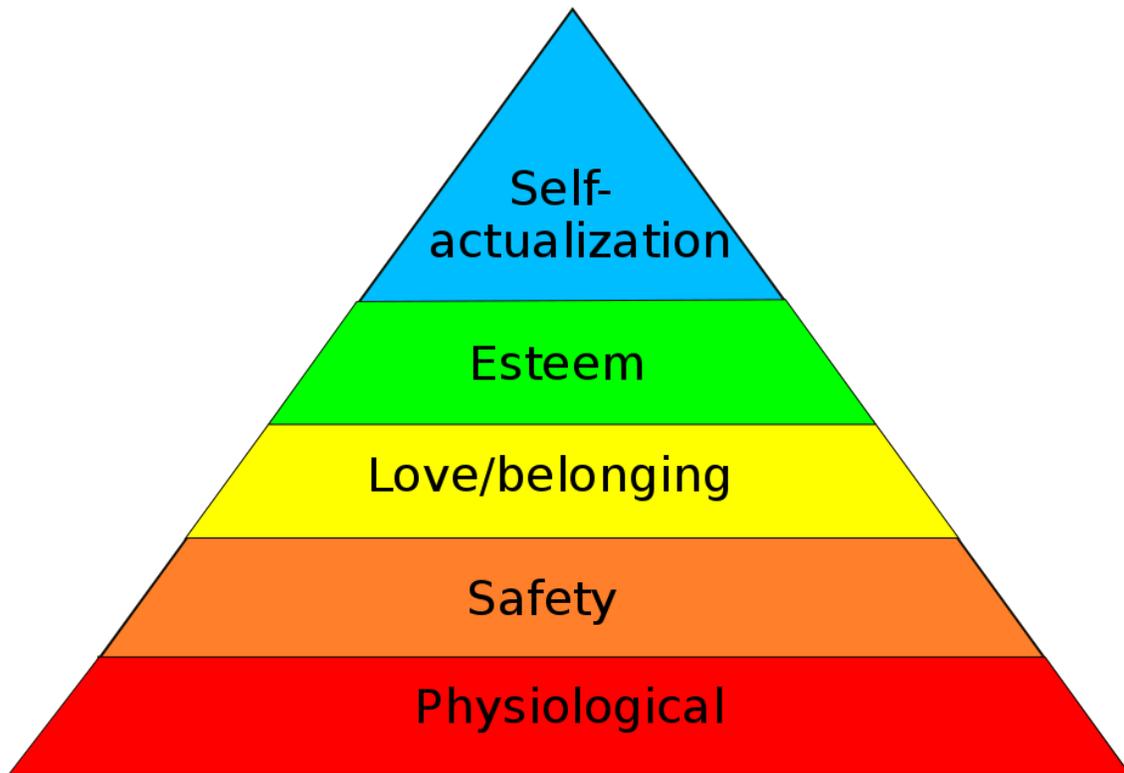
When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them.... We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

Those words were penned by Thomas Jefferson, who happened to own 187 slaves. But let's not think about that now! I've got these unalienable Rights to Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. It's like a religion in America, a religion that ensures that no one is a slave and everyone is a master.

So according to the law, I protect myself from slavery by claiming rights and pursuing happiness. To put it in modern, psychological lingo, I pursue happiness by climbing Dr. Abraham Maslow's pyramid of self-actualization— hierarchy of needs. You remember this from Psych 101, right? [Photo C] Happiness is at the top. So to climb the pyramid and make the journey to blessedness (happiness)...

1. First I need to take care of my physical needs, and that requires money. Believe it or not, this attaché case is full of money. [There is a chain around the case.] And that spells freedom.
2. Second, I need safety and security. I need armor, I need weapons, and I need legislations—laws, in order to protect my unalienable rights. [Peter holds up props.]

3. Third, I need “to belong.” I need honor and respect. This graduation gown is what I got when I received my Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary and was ordained in the Presbyterian Church USA, where I belonged with honor and respect. I earned it!
4. Fourth, I need self-esteem. I need to esteem myself. I need to be first. I need to be best. I need that blue ribbon in the picture. Well, to be best, someone else must be worst; to be first, someone must be last. How else could I win? To win I need to be the master of something or someone.



*Figure 1 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs by FireflySixtySeven on Wikimedia CC BY-SA 4.0*

So to pursue happiness [Peter acts out this list with props]:

- I compete.
- I clothe myself in honor and dignity—pride.
- I put up my armor.
- I pick up my weapons.
- I claim my rights according to the law.
- I hang on to my money; actually, I chain money to myself to ensure my freedom.

And now, I'm self-actualized. I'm free. I'm happy. I am the master. I am lord of my world. So back off! It's my world. I'm entitled to it. Don't you touch me! I've got a right to privacy. Are you laughin' at me? How dare you insult my honor! I'm happy. I'm free.

And now, what does the American church do in this environment? We say, "Oh, I see that you're pursuing happiness. Well, we're the best at pursuing happiness. In fact, we have God's formula for happiness!"

Jesus can make you rich.

Jesus can make you safe and secure. He's the ultimate health insurance and life insurance. And talk about weapons and armor—we have the Armor of God! Don't ask what it is, but we got armor.

Jesus can make you belong...to our club. And you'll be proud that you are a Christian.

Jesus can make you a winner. He can help you beat your neighbor.

Use Jesus to turn yourself into a rich, young ruler.

Use Jesus to build bigger barns so you can take your ease.

Use Jesus so you're never rejected, beaten, stripped, and crucified.

Use Jesus to become a master, even a Master of Divinity.

We'll help you use Jesus to control God, so you'll never be a slave again! We'll help you take knowledge of good and evil to become self-actualized.

Well, maybe we should read our text for the day.

John 13:12:

*When he [Jesus] 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?"*

What did He do to them? John 13:3: "Knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands" [that is, knowing that He had all wealth, security, belonging, and power...knowing He had all this stuff]...John 13:4: "He rose from supper and laid aside his garments." The ESV translates it as "outer garments," which it might have been, but the word just basically means clothes.

Hey, do you remember who invented clothes? It was Adam and Eve. And that was right after the snake tempted them to make themselves in God's image. He tempted them with self-actualization. And they made clothes to cover their private parts, to cover their differences and incomplete-nesses. They made clothes to protect themselves from each other and God. Now, my wife told me that I wasn't allowed to fully demonstrate what Jesus did, and that's kind of a relief, because I'd feel pretty humiliated and vulnerable. Yet that's the point. And Jesus did this in front of Judas. Talk about vulnerable!

He humbled Himself, took off His garments, and wrapped a towel around His waist. John 13:5: "He began to wash the disciples' feet with that towel with which He was girded"...such that the dirt that was on their feet was now on that towel that He was wearing. Peter's feet, even Judas'

feet. That's what offended them. "He emptied Himself and took the form of a slave"...the *morphe* of a slave. He literally morphed into a slave. The master of all became a slave.

You see, washing feet was a job assigned to Gentile slaves, not even Jewish slaves. This job was reserved for slaves, women, and children. Isn't it interesting that to enter the kingdom we must become like "little children"? And in that kingdom we are the Bride of Christ? And that anyone who calls Jesus Lord simultaneously calls himself or herself His *slave*? The kingdom of Heaven is a kingdom of slaves, brides, and little children.

John 13:12:

*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.*

"Blessed are you." That word for blessed is often translated "happy," because that's what it means. "Happy are you if..." Check this out; this is huge: Jesus is giving us a formula for happiness. But what a weird formula!

- Happy are you if you know these things and do them.
- Happy are you if you aspire to being a slave.
- Happy are you if you go down the up staircase.
- Happy are you if you surrender your rights: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
- Happy are you if you don't pursue your own happiness but another's happiness.
- Happy are the slaves...in spirit. Blessed are the poor, mourning, meek, and reviled.

How thoroughly weird and impractical!

And yet, do you ever get frustrated with standard, practical religion? I mean, you do all the religious stuff so you'll be blessed, but Jesus just doesn't seem to work. You run and you run and you get further and further away. So you think to yourself, "Man, that Jesus is just full of baloney!" Kind of like this:

[Film clip from *Dumb and Dumber*]

[Two men in a truck see the Colorado state line sign.]

Harry: Hey look! We're almost in Colorado. What d'ya say we change seats. I've been driving for nine straight hours. I don't have the energy to start a new state.

[Gas station stop]

Lloyd: Hey, Harry, I got some beef jerky.... [Harry snores.] Some people just weren't cut out for life on the road.

[Harry sleeps, and Lloyd takes the wrong road while trying to stop Harry's snoring.]

Lloyd, throwing a paper wad at Harry's head: *Hey, I was wondering when you were going to get up! Ha!*

Harry: *How long have I been out?*

Lloyd: *I'd say a good five hours [yawning].*

Harry: *Huh. I expected the Rocky Mountains to be a little rockier than this.*

Lloyd: *I was thinking the same thing. That John Denver's full of s\*%# , man.*

[Stopped and standing on the side of the road]

Lloyd: *I'm only human, Harry!*

Harry: *You drove almost a sixth of the way across the country in the wrong direction!*

Maybe all of us humans are driving in the wrong direction, just like Harry and Lloyd pursuing their promised land (Aspen, Colorado) in the classic film *Dumb and Dumber*. The world is travelling in the wrong direction, which is dumb. And we religious types just help them drive faster, which is dumber.

And so the King of kings and Lord of lords, the Master of all, hangs on a cross in the middle of the road revealing the fact that we're not just bad drivers or driving too slow or in need of a better map or a new vehicle. We're driving in the wrong direction. And that's why the last are first, and the first are last. That's why "blessed are the little children, the women, and the slaves. Blessed are the poor, the meek, the mourning, the reviled, and the persecuted."

To a friend of mine, a critic once pointed out that if you invented a religion to contradict every one of the beatitudes, it would look a lot like what he experienced at church:

- Not "blessed are the poor," but "blessed are the rich."
- Not "blessed are the meek," but "blessed are the assertive."
- Not "blessed are the slaves," but "blessed are the masters."

Jesus said, "Happy are those who know these things and do them." Wash feet.

Dr. Scott Peck used to tell about a woman he was counseling for severe depression. One day she came into the office just bubbling over with joy. He asked her what happened. She said, "I just had a very happy experience. My car broke down, so I called my pastor and asked for a ride to therapy. He gave me a ride but had to make a couple quick hospital calls on the way. He asked me to go in with him, and I visited sick people, prayed for them, encouraged them, and touched them. And now I'm just so happy!" Dr. Peck said, "Great! Now we know how to treat your depression." She looked at him with surprise and said, "Well, you don't expect me to do that every day!"

I think we're all a bit like that. We've tasted the happiness Jesus talks about, but we don't think we can trust it. And, you know, I visit people in the hospital, I serve, and I slave. Actually it's my

job—how I earn my pay. And I get depressed a lot. You serve, you slave, and you're not always "happy." Not all slaves are happy. Not all feet-washers are happy, that's for sure.

Well, Jesus said, "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them." You have to know something and do something. If you know it, and don't do it you're not really knowing it. And if you do it and don't know it, you're not really doing it.

So what are we supposed to do?

Humble ourselves.

Seek the lowest position in any room.

Morph into slaves and wash feet.

Clean bedpans.

Serve even our enemies.

We must do something but simultaneously know something, really know something, in order to be blessed. "If you know these things," said Jesus. What things?

Well, here's one, in John 13:3: "Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, washed feet." In a few paragraphs, John 16:15, Jesus says, "All that the Father has is mine; therefore, I said he (the Holy Spirit) will take what is mine and declare it to you." Wow! St. Paul writes, "All things are yours and you are Christ's and Christ is God's." You need to know that you are a child, about to inherit all things, for all things are yours.

"All things"...and so there is *no thing* left to earn.

- If you wash feet and clean bedpans for money or security or to get love or a sense of belonging...
- If you serve in order to obtain self-esteem, honor, or identity...
- If you become a slave to try and climb Maslow's Pyramid to achieve self-actualization...

You don't know it, you aren't doing it, and you'll be miserable. You must know: All things are yours by grace...including the position of slave. You can't earn the status of slave. You must surrender to slavery. And maybe you can't pursue real happiness. You have to surrender to happiness. So you must know: All things are yours by grace...yet you are a child, you are a slave, if you call Jesus "Master." And that's another thing you need to know, that Jesus is your Master. The people you serve are *not* your master. You're not working for them. If you think you are, you'll be miserable and they'll be terrible masters.

Jesus is your Master. And He's a good Master.

You serve a Master who is constantly serving you. You are the slave of a Master who has enslaved Himself to you. Don't make it all about you. You're a slave. But your Master makes it all about you. He enslaves Himself to you. His passion is your completeness, your blessedness, your happiness. So if He calls you to die, it's so you can live. If He calls you to become a slave, it's so you can be free. If He calls you to surrender some pleasure, it's to receive His joy. So you must know...

1. All things are yours by grace.

2. Your Master is good.
3. Your Master is a slave, and you can't be better than your master. "A slave is not better than his master," Jesus said. But look: Your master is a slave. He's the pinnacle; He's perfection; He's the best.

So when people treat you like a slave, when you're poor and meek and mourning and reviled and persecuted, when you feel like the last and least and people don't respect you, you may be tempted to think, "Everything is wrong!" But take another look. Maybe everything is *right*. You are aspiring to the status of your Master. And your Master is a slave. You cannot get any better than that. You've gone down the up staircase. You've reached the finish line. You were aspiring to slavery. The entire world was driving in the wrong direction.

"If you know these things and do these things," said Jesus, "then blessed are you"...happy are you, free are you. You know what really enslaves me and gets me depressed?

My own sense of entitlement and unalienable rights.

My own pursuit of happiness.

My own driven-ness to be self-actualized.

My desperation to be honored, to become the master of my world.

My greatest bondage is my desperate desire to make myself in God's image, and the constant realization that I fail. My greatest bondage is my own will. The world tells me that freedom comes through exerting my will, but freedom comes through sacrificing my will. The world tells me that happiness is getting my will, but happiness is surrendering my will. You really can't pursue happiness, but happiness is pursuing you. Happiness is your Father's will. His name is Jesus.

Freedom and happiness are not getting whatever you will, for whatever you will is the prison that enslaves you. But when I surrender my will to my Master's will, the prison walls are breached, the chains are broken, and I meet God in even the last and least of these. And they meet God in me. God flows in and out of me; that is, love flows in and out of me. Love hurts at first; it's a sacrifice in this world. Love hurts at first, but love is life, and life is happy and free.

Remember what I told you a few weeks ago? How the white, rich, Harvard psychologist Dr. Robert Coles was mystified by the happiness of little Ruby Bridges? How he looked down at six-year-old Ruby when he found out she was praying for the angry, white folks that would scream at her every day? How he asked, "Ruby, why do you pray for them?" Remember her confused response? She said, "Well, don't you think they need praying for?"

Who needs praying for? The Master or the slaves?

Dr. Coles tells about another child he interviewed, a migrant worker, ten years old, already working the fields. She told him that Jesus cried for everyone, and if we paid attention, we'd cry for everyone too. Dr. Coles said, "Everyone? Do you mean that you even have to cry for the growers who own all this land?" She looked up and said, "Yes, sir. Especially you have to cry for the rich. They're in the worst trouble of all. Jesus told us so."

Now, it's not a bad thing to make a bunch of money. It's a good thing to make a bunch of money. It's just a bad thing to *keep* a bunch of money in a world of need. Because then you have to convince yourself you've earned it, convince yourself it's not a gift of grace, and convince yourself you are a master and not a slave. And that's not blessed. That's cursed. And you need crying for and praying for.

See, little Ruby and the migrant worker girl knew it's usually not the slaves who are in the worst bondage. It's those who seek to be the master. Even in all those parables of the good steward, the steward always remains a slave who owns nothing.

And now you may say, "OK. But, Peter, let's go back to the start of the message. Clearly institutional slavery is evil. Why didn't Jesus destroy it?" Well, He did.

John 13:30:

*So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night. When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now [when He emptied Himself and morphed into a slave] 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 morphing into slaves]. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

You realize that there is one man who has done more than any other man (or government) in the history of our world to destroy institutional slavery, the denigration of women, and abuse of children. One man, and that man is Jesus. Theoretically there are two ways to destroy institutional slavery:

1. You could turn everyone into a master, but then everyone is alone. Each, master of their own world, yet utterly alone in a very small, dark, dead world. That's Hell.
2. You could turn everyone into a slave, a real slave, so each would want to wash feet.

So Peter writes, "Slaves, submit (vs. 18), for this is grace (vs. 19)." Paul writes, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters (vs. 5), and masters do the same to them (vs. 9). Be a slave of your slaves. And, Philemon, take Onesimus back, not as your slave but as your brother. And Jesus, the Master of all, made Himself slave for all and commanded us, "Love as I have loved you."

To make everyone master is Hell.  
To make everyone slave is just the opposite.

- When one person becomes a slave, in a world of people trying to be masters, it looks like a cross.
- When one person sacrifices, it looks like a cross.
- When two people sacrifice, it looks like a marriage—a *good* marriage.
- When all sacrifice, when first becomes last but then last becomes first, so that first becomes last and last become first, and first last, and last first...it's like a great dance. It's the Great Banquet. A party. It's the land of the free and the happy. It's the Promised Land. It's the Kingdom of Heaven. It's eternal life in God's image. And you're home.

### **Communion**

On the night that Jesus washed the disciples feet, on the night the whole world refused to dance, the Master of all took bread and broke it saying, "This is my body, given to you. Take and eat, and do this in remembrance of me." And in the same way after supper, having given thanks, He took

the cup and said, "This is the new covenant in my blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it, all of you, and do it in remembrance of me. If you know these things, happy are you if you do them." The song "Amazing Grace" was written by a master, a slave-trader...an ex-master, an ex-slave-trader...who became a slave.

### **Benediction**

"If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them." We come to worship to know these things, and then it's a good time for the pastor to say, "You can do these things by filling out a pledge card or going on a mission trip." But your whole life is to be "doing these things."

- Maybe you're the president of your company. You're called to wash feet.
- Maybe you're a shipping clerk in some company. You're called to wash the feet of your boss.
- Maybe you're a mom. You're called to wash your baby's feet.
- Maybe you're a pastor. You're called to wash feet knowing you're serving Jesus in the last and the least.

So in the name of Jesus, may you be blessed. Believe the Gospel. In Jesus' name, amen.

*Disclaimer: This document is a draft and has not been edited by the author. Therefore, there may be discrepancies. Some discrepancies may be minor; some may have to do with theology. When in doubt, please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website and don't be shy about informing us of errors.*