

January 2, 2000

Every year in our church we focus in on one of the God-given purposes for our congregation. It is not that we try to ignore the others but rather we highlight one to try to educate and to motivate us and this year we are going to focus in on the theme, "The Year of the Servant". What we are going to ask is that the members of our congregation would become involved in direct service to others and the value that we are going to try to help create is a church family that views itself as a group of servants. Now the passage of scripture that I wanted to read today is from the book of Mark, Chapter 10. It is really going to be the theme verse throughout the entire year and then I am going to read a specific passage out of the book of John. But in John, Chapter 10, beginning down in verse 42, Jesus is talking to his disciples who have just been in a big argument. And what they had been arguing about is who is the greatest among them and Jesus said, in Verse 42, Jesus called them together and said, *You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lorded over them and their high officials exercised authority over them. It shall not be with you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must first be a servant and whoever wants to be first must first be a slave of all. For the son of man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life for ransom for many.*

An illustration of that passage of scripture is over in the book of John, Chapter 13. It is that scripture that most of you are familiar with, it is the night Jesus washed his disciples' feet. Again, they were in an argument, again Jesus wanted to teach them and so we begin reading in Verse 2 of Chapter 13. The evening meal was served, the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, Son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power and that he had come from God and that He was returning to God so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that he poured water in a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. This passage of scripture takes place on one of the high and holy nights of the Jews. It is the night when they are all gathered together to worship God for Passover. It is their celebration of when they were miraculously brought out of slavery from Egypt. Jesus wanted to be with them where they could celebrate the past but he also wanted to institute what we know as the Lord's Supper. As you know, in Jewish Passover you have a piece of bread and the piece of bread is without any yeast in it, which means that it is flat. And what it is to symbolize is that we are ready to go in your commands, we won't even wait around for the bread to rise. We are ready to go. And the little bit of wine that they would drink was to symbolize that night when God said, *I want you to slay an animal, and I want you to sprinkle blood over the door post to symbolize your faith in me and as the angel of God moved throughout the country of Egypt, when he saw the blood over it, then he passed over.* So they held in their hand a piece of bread, they held in their hand some wine and Jesus said, *Now listen, you know what this means, now let me tell you what it is going to mean to you further. This bread represents my body, this wine represents my death,* and so that was a wonderful teaching night that Jesus had planned for his disciples. But it was all getting ready to be ruined. And the reason was that the Bible indicates that they are over in little groups and they are arguing. And what they are arguing about seemingly had to do with the seating at the table they were getting ready to eat at. Now it was

oriental custom that the host would be here and then he would put his guests of honor down the table. Now, if you haven't read it recently it blows your mind to realize that the guest of honor that night was Judas and here they were all over to the side and they were saying, "Why aren't we next to Jesus? Why aren't we at the place of position?" And so they were arguing. Now I want you to put it in context. Here is the night of Passover. They are talking about the night that God miraculously released slaves. Nothing they did, it was all a grace. Here was Jesus, talking about his death. Need not be reminded by 9:00 the next morning he is going to be on a cross. Here he is with his mind on the sacrifice of his life for the sins of the world and here are his disciples over in corners like little children fussing because they are not first in line. And Jesus gets up, takes off his robe, puts a towel around his waist, gets some water, and he starts walking around in front of the disciples.

Now, in Bible times it was very hot, very dusty, and people wore sandals. It was just oriental custom that when you walked into the house, your host would sit down and he would wash your feet. Well, the disciples were so busy arguing with each other they didn't even ask who is going to do it tonight? And so here is the Lord Almighty, who is getting ready to die for the sins of the world, here he is walking around with a towel and a basin of water saying I want to wash your feet. Now, the electricity of that moment is to teach us that what Jesus wanted to say the last night he was here is that you don't understand me at all unless you understand that you are called to be a servant. Now Jesus, on three different occasions turned to his disciples and said, *There are some things you have to pick up if you are going to follow me.* First thing he said was, *You are going to have to pick up your cross to follow me.* Now a cross someone said is an I with the I crossed out. It is saying, "Dear God, I want to do your will. I don't want my ego to always be in charge. Whatever you want me to do, that is what I want to do." Jesus said *the only man who can follow me is the person who is willing to put their own agenda aside and choose God's.* He said on the second occasion, *if you are ever going to follow me you are going to have to take up your yoke and follow me.* Now a yoke was simply a biblical term which meant that you had to be my disciple, you had to learn of me, you have to study of me. And the person who is going to follow Jesus is not the person who has a one time experience with God and then forgets it. But it is a lifelong adventure of learning, serving God. Now here he comes the last night. He turns to them and says, *now, if you're going to follow me you are going to have to pick up a towel. You're going to have to understand that if you're going to be my disciple you also have to become a servant.* Now, why is it so important that you and I become servants? Well, let me tell you reason number one. Because it is the only way that you will ever understand Jesus.

You are aware that if you put a little prefix on the end of a word that its I-a-n what that does is that it says this is a small thing like this. So, if you spell Christian, C-h-r-I-s-t you understand but when you put I-a-n on it what you are saying is that we are smaller replicas of Christ. We are the people who want to use him as our model, he is our example, and what we are is that we are replicas of who he is. Well, who is he? Well, he said it in the first passage of scripture I read. He said, *I have come not to get people to serve me, I have come to serve others. I have come to have a whole attitude where I am going to be the person who is going to look out for your needs and ask how I can help you.* Now, if you are ever going to understand him then we're going to have to do the

same thing and one of the reasons that you can come to church all your life and sing the songs and read the scripture and say your prayers and don't feel like you're ever making any advance in your Christian life is because we never have understood who He essentially is. He is a servant.

Now, sometimes we make mistakes in other areas. Let me give you another story Jesus taught. He told the story you will remember of the prodigal son. The prodigal son left. The father's heart was broken. He used to go on a regular basis, look down the road, and say maybe today is the day my boy is going to come home. One day he came home. He said, "let's throw a big feast." You will remember that the Daddy had another son who became very angry. Why are you throwing this boy a feast? He's thrown away all the money you gave him and here he comes with his tail between his legs and now you throw him a feast. And the Daddy looks to his older son and says, "Son, don't you understand? He's still my boy. I still love him. I've been looking for him. I've been praying for him. I've been waiting for him."

Now a lot of us come to church and we never do understand God because we don't understand he still is the broken-hearted father. He's still the one that wants people to come to him. He still is looking. He's still waiting. And if we don't have a compassionate spirit like a father we'll never understand Jesus. Here, you'll never understand Jesus. Unless you understand that you are to become a servant. I find it fascinating in the Bible that the Bible says that there are two kind of leaders in churches. One are pastors, ministers. The other are deacons. Through the years I have had so many deacons to come to me and say, "In the Bible it says what kind of person a deacon ought to be but it doesn't say what a deacon ought to do. What are we to do?" And then I remind them. The word deacon is two words. Di conos. Di conos means through the dust. It means humility and servanthood. And what I say to them, if you are the right person you will figure out what to do. If you are a person who is interested in serving others, that may take different forms in different cultures but you will find something to do. And what he called us to be is, he called us to be servants. Now, once you begin to enter into this servant mentality, then what you begin to experience is the vision of Jesus. You begin to see the world like Jesus did. Listen to what Jesus said. Jesus said, *go into all the world. Be a servant to everybody. Not just your kind. Not just your folk. Everybody.* You are to be a servant. And once you begin to get this mentality then you begin to see the world with all of its hurts and needs. We are in the process right now of taking up the largest offering we take up every year. We call it our International Mission Offering, or we call it our Lottie Moon Christmas Offering. During the holidays, I happened to make mention what the goal of our offering was this year. A guest came to me and he said, "Well, boy, this must be an awfully rich church." I said, "No, we don't have any rich people in this church, we are all just kind of middle-class folk." He said, "Well, the offering is so big." I said, "Well, let me tell you about that. We have about 12 families that used to be members of this congregation that are now all around the world, so it's pretty easy for me to challenge folk to give when mom and dad are sitting here and their children are sitting in Indonesia." And I said, "You also need to understand that last year we sent nearly 70 people who paid their own way and went to mission trips all the way around the world. So, when they come back, I don't have to say, guess what? We

ought to give to the Lottie Moon Christmas offering. What they say is, "When is it time to give?"

We are getting ready to send a group in just a few weeks down to Surinam right on the coast of South America. They are going to live out in the jungle, they are going to sleep in hammocks, they are going to build docks for boats so missionaries can go up and down the river. ...

But when those folk come back I don't have to say to them, you know, it would be good maybe if we give some money for the missionaries. We've got another group getting ready to go to Central America. Some of the doctors and nurses in our church are getting ready to go to Central America where there have been so many natural disasters. And they are going to be there and handle folk and hand out medicine. I don't have to say to those folk, get a vision of the world. They have it because they've already decided what they are going to do is live their life to be a servant to others. Once you become a servant you too are going to begin to get a vision for the world like Jesus saw it. But you are going to get something else. You are going to get the absolute joy that he had of helping others. It happened again this year, I'll bet it happened at your house. Part of my family was home with grandkids and we were all around the Christmas tree and we were opening presents. And finally, one of my grandchildren said, "Aren't you going to open any of your presents?" I didn't realize I hadn't opened anything yet. I saw this one open one and had a smile on her face and this one open one... and I was getting a lot bigger joy out of watching them than in opening anything for myself. And parents are aware that the joy you get is not what somebody does for you but what you get a chance to do for somebody else. I love the story I read about Christmas. A man was walking down the street buying his presents. He noticed a little kid, nose against the window, inside the window there was a toy. Just to pass the time away the man said, "Are you going to get that for Christmas?" And he said, "No, I don't believe I am." "Well, isn't your Daddy going to buy it?" "Daddy don't live with us anymore." "Well, what about Mom? Couldn't Mom get it for you?" "Mom died last month." The man went inside, hauled it to a clerk, bought it, wrapped it, gave it to the little boy and the little boy went running down the street with the present in his arms and somebody asked the man, what did you do the rest of the night? He said, I walked around looking for little boys that had their nose against the window. Do you understand that Jesus was a person who was filled with joy. Why? Because he was always doing something for somebody else. And once your life begins to simplify what Jesus lived, then you begin to understand who he really is.

Second reason is because the only way you can really understand your faith. Many of you here are familiar with the book of Ephesians and you are particularly familiar with Chapter 2 when he talks about how by grace you are saved through faith. I would encourage you when you go home to go on down to verse 10 because this is what Ephesians 2:10 says, it says for you are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God has before ordained of you should do. Now listen to what the Christian life says. Before you were ever born God knew you were coming. Before you ever started living, God had a map of your life. And one day God came into your life and saved you by Jesus Christ and he said, now listen, I have a map for you. I have already planned some things you can do. I have some suggestions here. I am going to

open doors for you. And the Christian life is simply walking through the doors that God has already laid out and doing what God called us to do. In the book it says, let me tell you what the Bible is. 1 Timothy. The Bible is given for your instruction, for your reproof, for your correction, so that you may do good works. We have been talking a great deal in our church this past year about spiritual gifts and that all of us have a gift and an ability to do something. Listen to 1 Corinthians. You have been given a gift so that you might serve others. This is the way the Bible ends. Behold I come quickly. My reward is in my hand. I give it to those who do good works. It is just impossible for me to try to explain to you the Christian faith. If you don't also make a commitment that you are going to be a servant. Hear the last word. Picking up a towel, becoming a servant is the best way to introduce Christianity to others. I think you already know it but if you don't here's important information. Most people who don't go to church think you have an agenda. And their agenda is that you are going to invite them to come to church and the reason you want them to come to church is so they can become members and the reason you want them to become members is so you can get their money. And so whenever you talk to them they raise their hands like this but you need to understand that behind that is the agenda that they think you are sitting there counting the money. Sometimes, some of our members and our leadership say to me, you know Pastor, you ought to talk more about money on Sundays. And I say, I'll talk to you about it some other time. Don't say too much on it on Sunday because so many people who walk in the door think that the reason that I am talking to them is to try to get their money. They feel like it's an agenda. There is a large church now in Southern California. The pastor went to start it and he did a survey on the community and says, why don't you go to church? Be interesting to learn that in Southern California the number one reason was, because all they want is my money. So that when you try to do something, immediately they say, you've got an agenda. But suppose, suppose you did something that was so pure, so humble, so caring, so loving, that costs you something, and you didn't ask anything in return. Suppose somebody dies and you go and you give them a meal. And you say, you don't even have to bring the dishes back. Or you hear that your neighbor's been sick and you go and say, if it will be all right I will be glad to take your child over to my house and sit with him. What do you say, like a church in Chicago, that every Saturday their members get into vans and go into the inner city in Chicago and help poor people to renovate their houses and they get back in their vans and they come back and they don't say anything. What will happen is what happened to me this summer when a group in this church went to Africa with me and one of the Africans turned and said, who paid y'all's way? And one of our members said, we did. Why would you give your money to come to us that you don't even know? Because that is what our Lord told us to do. One of my real good friends is pastor in North Mississippi, has built a wonderful congregation there. I asked him one day, I said, how do you get all these people to come to your church? I want you to hear his answer. Because I go first and empty their bedpans. What does it mean when you go in the spirit of Jesus and say, here I am to be your servant? What I find so fascinating is that when he was on the cross, he didn't say, I'm not going to do this now unless you all believe. He just went on and did it. And people through these thousands of years have loved him for being their servant. They have been willing to follow him. The biggest impact you make is when people realize

you don't have an agenda. I saw a man one day that was dressed in almost a military uniform. I asked him about it. I was just learning about a group called the Salvation Army. I noticed on this lapel he had an "s" and on this lapel he had an "s" and I said, explain that to me. I would understand an "s" and an "a" – Salvation Army – but "s" and "s"? And he said, because that is our philosophy. We are saved to serve. God one day saw you. He said, I have a plan and a purpose for you. I want you to see the world like I see it. I want you to follow me and know my joy. I want to save you to serve. So this is what I wanted to ask you today. I wanted to ask you if you would pick up a towel. Deliberately, we did not come today with an insert in your bulletin to say, here's a bunch of things you can do, because you can do things and not be a servant. What I am asking you today is, not to do anything yet. I am asking you, are you willing to pick up a towel and some water and to walk out of this building today and say, I will be a servant. Jesus said, I have not come to be served but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many. Are you willing to lay yourself on his altar and say, I will be his servant? Some of you, God has been working in your life to bring you to himself. He has a wonderful plan for you. Maybe today you need to come and say, I want to give my heart and my life to Christ. Some of you are Christians who need a church family and a church home and the reason you do it is so that you can find a place of ministry. Sometimes people call me and say, what does your church offer? I want to tell you what we offer. We offer a towel and a place where you can become what God calls you to be. I want to ask you today, if you want to come to be a part of a towel-carrying family and to be a servant to others. In the first service some of our members came and just stood here at the altar and said, God, I want to dedicate myself on this first Sunday of the New Year to be your servant. I don't know what God is doing in your life right now. I just pray that right now you will surrender yourself to his leadership and do what he asks you to do right now, will you?