

WHAT NOT TO WEAR
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

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What Not to Wear had a decade long run on The Learning Channel. Show participants were nominated by co-workers who just happened to notice their colleague's catastrophic clothes, or family and friends who were embarrassed by the participant's fashion faux pas. The show starts off with the hosts, Stacy and Clinton, belittling the participant's attire, whether "unflattering mom jeans" for the women or "six-inch wide ties that reached the belly button" for the men. Or the proverbial favorite, rubber flip flops – beachwear that people substitute for professional or evening attire. Thus the show is entitled *What Not to Wear*. "Don't wear these things," they are saying to those with a wonky wardrobe.

The professionals work with fashion offenders, offering a \$5,000 gift card if they will toss all their tacky stuff. After the fashion offender agrees to get rid of her old garb, the show shifts as the participant is treated with a trip to New York to buy the finest fashions that money can buy.

In the end, the mis-dressed mess is displayed as a fashionista; the initially reluctant participant now celebrates her new closet full of classy clothes.

If you've seen one of those episodes, you've seen them all. "What not to wear."

Wasn't it Mark Twain who once said, "Clothes make the man"?

In John 13, we learn how to clothe ourselves like the Christ. Perhaps it was even the last night of his life as Jesus wore his loose-fitting outer garment – a functional, common, but dressy enough for dinner portion of the evening, an evening which would include broken bread and shared wine. When it came time to teach and serve, however, he took off his outer garment, then tied a towel around his waist, and got down and served His disciples by washing their filthy feet.

Yes, Mark Twain may be right that the clothes make the man. But our outer garments really are not of all that much of interest to God. On the contrary, God, as usual, is interested on the inner wardrobe of those who want to follow Him. Maybe Paul tells us best in Colossians 3:12, "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience."

Isaiah 51:10 says, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God, for He hath clothed me with garments of salvation, He hath covered me with a robe of righteousness."

So when you and I come to Christ, we put on Christ in the sense that we put on His righteousness, we put on His holiness, we put on His nature.

Christ knew exactly what to wear; He tied on the servant's towel. As He washed the feet of His disciples, He was displaying His garments of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience – which is exactly what God wants us to wear, too.

Let's take a closer look at what happens in John 13 when, by Christ's example we learn exactly what to wear.

The thirty-three-year-old Jesus walked briskly along the dusty road with a small group of His followers. Over the three and a half years they had been with Him, Jesus had grown extremely fond of His disciples. They were traveling the short distance from Bethany to Jerusalem. Jesus reflects on how much He had been looking forward to the Passover – the last Passover He would share with His friends before what He knew would be His death. In fact, John tells us in 13:1 that Jesus loved them to the end.

Earlier that day Jesus had sent Peter and John into the city to prepare the Passover. “Where do you want us to prepare it?” they asked.

“When you enter the city,” He'd told them, “you will meet a man who is carrying a jug of water. Follow him. When he goes into a house, go in after him and say to the owner, ‘The Master says, “where is the guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?”’ He will show you a large upstairs room properly furnished. Prepare the Passover there.”

Peter and John had done as Jesus instructed and found everything exactly as He had told them. They had prepared the Passover before returning to Jesus.

As dusk came, Jesus and His twelve disciples reclined to eat their meal. In those days they did not sit at tables like we do. They reclined on individual couches. Jesus said to them, “I have longed to eat this Passover with you with great desire before I have to suffer. I will not eat of the Passover again until it is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God.”

And John gives us this unique part of the story. This is John's Gospel and only John's Gospel.

Jesus got up at the meal, took off His outer robe, and tied a large towel around his waist. Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash His disciples' feet and dry them with the towel tied around His waist.

He comes to Peter, and Peter said in amazement, “Lord, do you intend to wash my feet?”

“Right now you don't understand what I am doing,” Jesus told him, “but soon you will.”

“You will never wash my feet!” Peter replied.

People in those days wore sandals. They walked everywhere they went. Their feet were dusty and dirty and even had the filth of animal waste on them as the streets were filled with animals. It was the job of the lowest servant to actually wash the visitor's feet. Peter

was horrified at the thought of Jesus, his Lord and his Master, washing the stench of animals off his feet, the dirt and the dust.

“If I don’t wash your feet,” Jesus said, “you cannot have any partnership with me.”

“In that case, wash my hands and my head and my feet as well!” Peter exclaimed.

“That’s not necessary. If I wash your feet, you’ll be clean.” (www.antelope-ebooks.com/Religious/passover.html)

It’s hard for us to really realize how astonishing it is for Jesus to get up – the Rabbi, the Master, to take up the towel and begin washing the dirty, dusty, smelly feet of His disciples. Normally there were large water pots at the door of a house – because the roads of Israel were unsurfaced and unclean. In dry weather, they were inches deep in dust; in wet weather, with liquid mud. Sometimes the servant was posted there with a pitcher and a towel to wash the soiled feet of the guests as they came in.

But this was a private meeting. There was no servant at the Last Supper. So this, the job of a Gentile slave, became the task of our Lord.

Luke, when combined with John, gives us the fuller picture. In Luke 22:14, we have the account of the Lord’s Supper. He tells them in verse 15, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, for I say to you I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God.” In verse 19 He says the bread is His body, and the cup is His blood (v. 20).

But an astonishing thing happens. Even as Jesus is speaking about breaking His body and spilling His blood for His own, even as He is speaking of becoming the suffering servant of the prophet Isaiah, among His disciples (v. 24) “there arose also a dispute among them as to which one was regarded to be the greatest.” And Jesus tells them (v. 27) the greatest one is like He, the one who serves.

So I imagine that even as Jesus gets up to take off His robe, to take up the towel, the disciples are still arguing over the pecking order of the Kingdom. “When the Kingdom comes, I want to ride shotgun,” one of them said. “No, I’m going to sit at the right hand,” another one replied. “That’s going to be my spot,” a third one contended.

Even as they were bickering over who was going to be the greatest and by what criteria they might measure greatness in the Kingdom, the Rabbi Jesus, like the lowest of slaves, takes up the towel, pours the water in the basin, and, as the words of arrogance are leaving their lips, He washes their feet.

His humility – the humility of the Messiah, the teacher, the rabbi, the Lord of Lords – stuns them to complete silence. This task, normally reserved for a Gentile slave (and, in that society, a female slave) was being done by the greatest of all.

In many ways, we struggle in church not to be like those disciples, not to push for power, position and place but, rather, to take up the towel, to serve and to wash feet.

You might think that God's people would learn the lesson from the story. You might think that we'd all understand now that greatness in the church and greatness in the Kingdom of God is not based upon power or place or position but, rather, upon who is willing to take up the towel and serve.

A particular group comes to church asking the question, "How can I gain prestige and power at the church?" They want to serve on a power committee. They want to see their name in print. They want to be held in high esteem – high and lifted up above their fellow Christians. "Look at me," they say. "I am the greatest."

Their words sound exactly like the words of those disciples on that day – maybe a little more polished. Maybe we dare not stand up and say, "Hey, I'm the greatest." Perhaps we're a little bit more sophisticated than that. Maybe we express our wishes a little differently than that. We want our ideas to be the greatest, the way we interpret scripture, our pet doctrines, our pet projects – we push our agenda.

It's a mysterious sin. Oh, you can paint it, you can perfume it, but we can still smell it. Just like Jesus could smell those feet. Often we come around the table of the Lord like a bunch of disciples gathered with dirty feet and a proud heart, seeking, in our own subtle way, to be the greatest in the Kingdom of God.

But then there is another group – and there are a lot of you at First Baptist Church. You're the group that none could do without. You come to the church not saying, "What can the church do for me and mine?" You don't come looking for the place, power, and position. You come, and you take off your outer garment and you very quietly take up the towel. And while the rest of us are focused on the wrong thing, you begin doing the right thing. You begin washing feet.

I wish I knew what made you tick. I wish I could teach what you know to others. There is some way in which you really read the gospel and you really understand. You don't do lip service or tip your hat to Jesus' definition of greatness being the one who is least, the servant of all being the greatest of all. You really believe it. While the rest of us tipped our hat and went on pushing for power, you took the message, you took the very gospel to heart.

You live in a gospel world. You live in a world that is turned upside down, where the least is the most and the most is the least. You've really allowed the gospel of Christ Jesus to infiltrate your life, to transform you, to change who you are. There is no pride – there is only humility. There is no power – there is only service. There is no attitude – there is only action.

I look at you – thank goodness there are so many of you here – and I say, "Now they understand the gospel."

It strikes me odd. You live in the same world as others. You have the same friends as others. You go to the same places. But there is something different about you. You love,

you care, you go, you do, you give. And if I were to recite all the good things you've done, you'd be embarrassed and angry at me for saying it. Where do you get that from? The difference is you have taken the time to attend to the spirit, the God-given spirit, the in-God's-image spirit, the God-like quality in yourself – you nourish it, you feed it, you pray with it, you let it breathe. And the Spirit of Christ in you increases and eventually really shapes who you are. That's the difference. (Fred Craddock, *The Cherry Log Sermons*, p. 23)

And I say to you who take up the towel, you alone have understood the church, you alone have understood the words of Christ.

There is something else I want you to see in this passage. Not only should we understand greatness as it is defined by Jesus, but I want you to know that greatness comes in everyday acts of humility and service.

Jesus' greatness is not only found in the cross, it is found in washing feet – the humble job, the task that no one dare touch.

Some of us want to picture ourselves against a gray wall with some soldier saying, "It's your last chance to deny Christ. Deny Him and live." And we imagine ourself having the courage. We imagine them saying, "Ready. Aim. Fire." We see our bodies slumping, the flag at half mast, the widows weeping in the afternoon because we have been a Christian of great courage. We have taken the big stand for Christ. We've paid the price. We've sacrificed ourselves at that great moment. And now, they are gathering the stones to build the monument, and people will take pictures of it with their cameras. "Johnny, you stand over there by his monument, and let's get your picture." (Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, p. 155)

Most of us are not called to give our life to Christ exactly like that. For most of us, it's a daily taking up the cross – not a once-and-for-all driving of the pegs. Most of us spend our lives for Jesus by not writing one big check. Rather, we have to go what I would say is an even more difficult way. We have to write small checks all our life long. Little checks: 87 cents here, \$2.34 there, \$1.03 there. We, as we take up the towel and wash feet, are just nibbled away as we give of our lives.

The sum total of your life in the end comes down to not what have you done for yourself, not what have you accumulated in your own coffers, but what have you done for someone else – someone who can't expect it from you, someone who doesn't deserve it? How humble have you been? How often have you taken up the towel? Not with one big dramatic swoop, while others blow the trumpet. But, rather, quietly, subtly, every day taking up the towel.

As I look at people who make up this congregation at First Baptist Church of Amarillo, it's amazing to see and I thank God for those of you who really do get the gospel, those who are here every week, those who commit themselves to spiritual formation, who gather together with the people of God in God's house to worship. For you, this is the most important thing that happens all week long. You get it. You rearrange your schedule. You invite others to come. And just

heading toward downtown on Sunday morning brings excitement to your heart because you're going to meet your Lord in worship and do so in the midst of your brothers and sisters in Christ.

It's the same ones who take up the towel, who are people of a servant's heart. It's not really a matter of power and prestige in the community. I can show you two physicians in the congregation, and one will show up to do the most menial task – and his schedule is just as crowded as the other physician who wouldn't dare lower himself to taking up the towel. But for his fellow physician, taking up the towel is just a way of life. And no one is surprised to see him loading up Christmas presents that we're taking to needy toddlers.

Or you can take two CEOs. One is so occupied with his own kingdom and his own world and his own family that he has no time for God's family or God's Kingdom or God's world. But his fellow CEO shows up and, with his own hands and his own heart, labors for the Kingdom of God. He might teach preschoolers in Sunday School. He might fold up chairs after a basketball game.

There is just something different about the way the faithful have ordered their lives – those who take up the towel.

Fred Craddock recalls going to a church one Sunday afternoon. The church van pulled up in the parking lot, and a bunch of young people got out. They looked like they were thirteen, fourteen, or fifteen. At this church they all got out with their bedrolls – it was the awfulest looking bunch of kids you'd ever seen, something like the cats would drag in. They were really worn out, in bad shape, tired, road weary. They had just returned from mission work. They named the place where they went. In one week the young people, along with other young people, had built a little church for a community. And they were beat, they looked terrible.

They were sitting on their bags waiting for their parents to pick them up. Dr. Craddock said to one of the boys, "Man, you're tired." And he said, "Whew – am I tired." Then he said, "This is the best tired I've ever felt."

That's what joy is. Do you feel that? "This is the best tired I've ever felt." The best tired you've ever felt is what the Bible calls joy. (Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, p. 94)

Albert Schweitzer, great mind, great man, said these words: "I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know, the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."

When is the last time your hands have washed stinky feet? When is the last time you've taken up the towel? When is the last time you've been God-like enough to quit worrying about position and power and prestige? When is the last time you've silently served and didn't care if anybody noticed? When is the last time somebody was shocked that a man or woman of your position would pour water in the basin and take up the towel to wash feet?

All I can tell you is that Jesus did it. And all I can tell you is that Jesus defined greatness not by what you accumulate, not by what title is on your desk. Rather, Jesus defined greatness by how much service is in your heart and in your hands.

Jesus – the Lord of Lord and the King of Kings, the Creator the universe, of the stars, the moon and the sun, the one worthy of worship, the one enthroned sitting at the right hand of God – getting the mud out from between the toes of twelve Jewish men. It boggles the mind to think about it.

What not to wear? Pride, power, prestige. The garments of Christ, however, would fit us all splendidly – humility, servanthood, a towel around the waist, ready to wash feet.

That evening, Jesus took the bread and broke it – his broken body. Then He took the cup and blessed it – His spilled blood. Let us cloth ourselves with His humble spirit and serve each other as He served us both in His life and, more importantly, in His death.