Improving Your Serve  
Lesson 13  
John 13:12-17

The Obedience of a Servant

In this study on the subject of obedience, we will learn that obedience is the most important virtue in the life of the believer because it shapes the foundation for our spiritual maturity and it is the starting point for all other Christian virtues. In the Pocket Catholic Dictionary, Jesuit Theologian Father John Anthony Hardon, defines obedience as “the moral virtue that inclines the will to comply with the will of another who has the right to command.” Father Hardon breaks down obedience as material and formal. Material is simply to carry out the physical action commanded; while formal is to perform an action precisely because a legitimate superior commands it. Father Hardon concludes that the extent of obedience is as wide as the authority of the person who commands it, while obedience to God is without limit. The higher authority of God and the authority of the person who is commanding limit obedience to human beings.

In this lesson, Chuck Swindoll reasons that no study of “servanthood” would be complete without a serious examination on the subject of obedience. Additionally, he advances the idea that the door of the servant hinges on the virtue of obedience without which there would be no servant. Commenting, “therein lies the secret of greatness in character”; and quoting William A. Ward, saying “every great person has first learned how to obey, whom to obey, and when to obey.” Consequently, if we are committed to improving our serve, it starts with hearing and obeying God as we learn to trust His plan for our lives.

I. Description of Obedience

Scripture teaches us that Jesus embodies the virtue of obedience. He is the visible expression of obedience to be lived out in the actions of every servant. In John 6:38, Jesus clearly declares His obedience and submission to God the Father by proclaiming, “For I came down from Heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me.” In this declaration, Jesus voluntarily surrenderers His will to the will of God the Father providing for us the definitive example of obedience.
Since Jesus is our example of obedience, let’s look at what He said about our obedience in Matthew 11:28-29.

Jesus, in these verses, issues an invitation before defining the specific qualities of obedience.

- How does Jesus invitation demonstrate obedience?

- Why do you think the invitation was directed to a specific group?

- What is Jesus commanding us to do in the process of preparing for service when He invites us to take up His yoke?

As our example of obedience, Jesus in Matthew 11:29b reveals His very heart in a portrait of “His innermost Self.”

Jesus describes Himself as “Gentle” and “Humble of Heart” and gives us a command to learn of Him.

The gentleness and humility of Jesus can be seen in every action of obedience to the Father and these are the qualities to be learned from Jesus and imitate in our lives. All who follow Him must learn from his example as well as from his teachings. As His followers, we should not think it beneath us to submit to every command and every area of His will as He has set us an example that “we should walk in His steps even as He has walked.”

- How would you define “gentle” and “humble” as described in Matthew 11:29?
• How is the gentleness and humility of Jesus, in 2Cor 10:1 and Mark 5:33-34, seen in his dealing with human nature?

• Describe the gentleness and humility of Jesus in John 4:34 and John 8:28-29 in His subjection to the Father.

• In 1Peter 2:23 what is Jesus conduct and conversation among men?

Gentleness and humility are the qualities that validated Jesus obedience and give us an example worthy of imitating. Chuck Swindoll reminds us that “like no one else who has lived, He practiced what He preached.”

II. Jesus Models Obedience

Ancient Jerusalem was characterized by “winding dirt roads covered with a thick layer of dust” that quickly became mud slicks when it rained, and unlike today, people walked everywhere in open-toed sandals through dusty dung-filled roads. Therefore, his or her feet were often dirty, smelly, and needing washing before entering someone’s home. As a gesture of hospitality, a Jewish custom was to wash the feet of strangers and travelers who they entertained in their homes. The host would provide water for guests to wash their own feet, or the host would serve the guests by washing their feet, or the host would provide a servant to wash their guest feet. However, if a family had no servant and the host was not able to provide the service, it was customary for the first guest to arrive to perform this role of servant for the other guest.
While the disciples performed this task before, this time as they gathered with Jesus in the upper room for the Passover meal, not one of them volunteered for the role of servant. So in John 13:3-11, Jesus takes this opportunity and assumes the role of their servant to teach them how to serve one another. From this action, Chuck Swindoll highlights three observations on serving.

A. **Christian service must be unannounced.**

During this gathering, without notice or fanfare, Jesus removed His outer garment, grabbed a towel, a pitcher of water, and a pan, and began to wash each disciple’s dirty feet.

What character trait does this act demonstrate that the disciples seem to be missing?

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What does this story communicate about our service to one another?

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B. **Christian servants must be willing to receive.**

Peter’s refusal to submit to the will of Jesus should remind us that to be effective as a servant, we must be willing to receive.

Why do you think Peter refused to let Jesus wash his feet?

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________________________________________________________________________

What does our reluctance to receive from others indicate about our character?
C. **Christian servants must have spiritual boldness.**

Jesus illustrates that servants are not exempt from confrontation as He confronts Peter’s refusal to submit to the foot washing.

What do you think Jesus meant in v8 by “If I do not wash you, you have no part with me?”

What was Jesus saying in v10 when He said, “He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet?”

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III. **Practical Application**

After Jesus had washed all the disciples’ feet, He sets down again at the table and in John 13:12-17, He teaches the practical application of humility and obedience that changed the course of service and ministry for all eternity. He starts with a soul searching question, “**Do you know what I have done to you?**” and concludes with a life changing promise “**If you know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.**” As we reflect on this model of servanthood, there are a few things to consider about obedience:

1. **John 13:14** > “Obedience will require us to get personally involved.”
2. **John 13:15** > “Obedience will require Christ-like selflessness.”

3. **John 13:17** > “We must always examine and honestly search our motives.”