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While Going: *The Mission of All Christians*

The Church Here and There

John 13, Philippians 1, 2

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As a church we gather and we scatter. Really to be biblical as a church, we have to value both. Seems like every generation struggles with balance. Our roots as fundamentalists would be that we were really good at gathering; we weren't really good at all at scattering. Seems like this current generation scatters well and, in some ways, they have lost the value of gathering. But as a church it's both. A church is not a building or structure. The church is the people. We have been given a mission to represent Jesus to the world. In order to be effective both here and there, it's important that we have the right heart.

That's where I want to start this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to John, Chapter 13—a familiar story that reminds us of the heart of Jesus. I want to pick it up in verse 4:

> **He got up from supper, and laid aside his garments; and taking a towel He girded Himself. Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. So He came to Simon Peter and He said to him, "Lord, do You wash My feet?" Jesus answered and said to him, "What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter." And Peter said to Him, "Never shall you wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, then wash not only my feet but also my hands and my head." Jesus said to him, "He who has been bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you." For He knew the one who was betraying him; for this reason He said, "Not all of you are clean." So when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments and reclined *at the table* again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you should also do as I did to you."** (*NASB John 13:4-15)

It's a familiar story. It was the custom of the day that when people who had been out in the street gathered into a home or in this case in the upper room, that a servant would wash the feet and, if it wasn't the servant, than it was typically the host. We know from the other gospels that the disciples were arguing about, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom?" Therefore, none of the disciples were willing to disqualify themselves by washing feet. So that's the context into which Jesus, the Creator of the universe made flesh, picks up a towel and takes a basin and begins to wash their feet. Now we don't really have to guess the reason; Jesus tells them the reason. The reason is that he was giving them an example, saying, "This is how I'm asking you to represent Me to the world—not with anger, not with debate and arguments but with the heart of a servant. I think it's worth asking ourselves, "Is that actually how we do life?" Jesus kind of summarizes this discussion in verse 34:

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. (Vs. 34-35)

How had Jesus loved them? Answer: He had washed their feet. So he says, "This is what I am asking you." The identifying mark of a disciple of Christ would the heart of a servant. So here's the question—be honest with yourself: When you leave the house every morning, do you leave with the heart of a servant? Do you enter your day saying, "This is going to be about me," or, "This is going to be about others?" "This is going to be about building *my* kingdom," or, "God, this is going to be about building *Your* kingdom"? "Do I go my way as a consumer," or, "Do I go through my day as a servant?" Oswald Sanders once said, "Greatness is not determined by the number of ones' servants but by the number one serves." So we ask ourselves: Is that actually how we go through life?

I think sometimes, maybe, we're willing to wash feet but we wash them in boiling water. I would suggest to you that there has been a lot of damage done in the name of Jesus under the umbrella of *tough love*. It's the heart of a servant that washes feet. Is it possible that God is asking you to wash the feet of the most irritating person you have at work, the neighbor that nobody gets along with, the student that everybody picks on? Isn't it possible that if the God of the universe was willing to wash the feet of prideful, arrogant, self-righteous disciples, that maybe He's asking us to rightly represent him to the world—not by being debaters, not by picking a fight, but by washing feet?

Paul picks up this theme in Philippians, Chapter 1. Philippians is really all about Paul's passion to represent the gospel. In verse 12 of Chapter 1 he says,

Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel...

He's talking there about—he is writing from a prison cell and he does not know if he's going to be released or executed. But rather than whining and complaining about that, he's viewing it through the lens of: how might God use this for the advantage of the gospel? So he goes on to talk about the fact that, "Okay, I'm in prison. There are prisoners that don't know Jesus. This is perfect." He talks about his access to the Praetorian Guard**,** an elite Roman guard that Paul never would have had access to unless he was imprisoned. So, rather viewing his circumstances as, "Woe is me; why would God do this," he views life through the lens of how might God use these circumstances to advance the gospel? It's a very interesting way to view life. Everything that we face—the ups, the downs; the good, the bad; the struggles, the joys—what if we actually framed those around this idea of, "How might God use this to advance the gospel"? What about a heart surgery? What about a cancer? What about a rebellious child? What about a struggle at work? Whatever it is—what if we viewed life through the lens of, "How might God use this as a way to advance the *Good News* of Jesus?" To think that way would require the heart of a servant. I think Paul summarizes this discussion in verse 21:

For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. He goes on in verse 27 and he says, **Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ;**

That word **conduct** is a Greek word that literally means *a citizen* and then the idea of **a manner worthy of the gospel**. He's actually picking up on something that was common in the city of Philippi. Philippi was a Roman colony and because Philippi was a Roman colony it gave them a lot

of advantages, a lot of perks, because of their connection to the Roman Empire. So the idea of *conduct* was the idea that as citizens of Rome they needed to live worthy of that, in essence to maintain that designation. So the idea of *a manner worthy* is picking up on the theme that in Philippi, when people would see one another in the streets, they would often greet one another by saying, "Live worthy; live worthy". And that reminded each other that we need to live worthy of being a colony of Rome. Paul's picking it up and saying that we as Christians are citizens of heaven, and we need to remind one another to live worthy of that designation. What is the heartbeat of the gospel and do we rightly represent that heartbeat in the circumstances of the environments of life?

> **...conduct yourselves worthy of the gospel of Christ; so that when I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving together for the faith of the gospel;** (Vs. 27-28)

That phrase **striving together** is an interesting phrase. The word striving is the Greek word from which we get our English word *athlete*. So, literally, it's *athletes together.* We would probably just use the word *team*—that we together are a team, working together for the cause of Christ. I have long maintained that churches get in conflict because they lack vision. Show me a church that's always in conflict; I'll show you a church that has no vision. At some point there has to be a vision big enough that says we lay our differences aside for the greater cause of the gospel—striving *together as one team.* That's in essence what he just said. Pick it up in Chapter 2, verse 1.

> **Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus,** (Vs. 1-5)

And then Paul goes into this magnificent reminder that Jesus was in the glories of heaven, that He gave that up to come to earth to become a man, ultimately to die on the cross for the sins of the world, was buried and was resurrected and returned to glory. If Jesus was willing to do that for us as sinners, then what would it mean to rightly represent that attitude to the world—to actually think of others as more important than ourselves, to live for something more than just me? So Paul's picking up this theme that the heartbeat of Jesus is to think of others, is to sacrifice, is to give ourselves up for the cause of the gospel.

It's really important to understand that when we're talking about sharing our faith, we're not talking about a method; we're not talking a technique or a gimmick. We're talking about genuinely representing the heart of Jesus to the world—entering into the world with the heart of a servant, with a heart to serve, with a heart to rightly represent Jesus. And we do that both *here and there*.

I want to make this very practical so let's spend a little time thinking about the church *gathered* and the church *scattered*. It's very important to understand to biblically be the church, the church gatherers. It's a time when the people of God gather together as the people of God. We gather to worship; we sing praises to God but we also sing about God to one another. We're reminding ourselves of what's true and what we live for. One of the challenges I think we have is a perspective that we are so convinced, for most people, Sunday is a day off, and so we think that way. We click it off. It's a day of rest. To rightly understand Sabbath rest is to understand that seven days a week I

rest in the finished work of Jesus—that's the *rest*. Sunday, when the church gathers, isn't a day to be *off*; it's a day to be *on*. It's a day that is very strategic to the mission. Maybe we rethink that it isn't just something I slip in and slip out of. Maybe it isn't something I check off the list so I can run to a soccer game or a ball game. Maybe it isn't just a day where I gather with the same people, my same friends in the hall, and then go home. Maybe it's actually more strategic than that.

Are you aware of the fact that every weekend people walk through these doors who are absolutely hanging by a thread. They are not sure they want to live one more day .They are not sure if they will ever know happiness or joy again. They're wondering if they will ever be loved, if they'll ever be accepted, if life will ever have meaning to them. It could be that a week ago everything was fine and this week their life has been devastated, and they are just hanging on by a thread. Just because you and your family are fine this morning doesn't mean everybody around you is fine this morning. We really need to understand, and we as a worship team talk about that all the time. The stakes are very high when we gather. There are people's lives that are at risk.

One of my favorite memories is one particular Sunday morning I happened to notice a woman seated in a different section all by herself, and from the moment the service started she began to weep. I knew who this woman was; I knew what her story was; I knew why she was all alone, and I knew why she was weeping, and my heart went out to her. Then, in another section, a woman stood up; she walked over; she gave this woman a hug. The woman embraced her; they cried together and then this woman stayed with her for the duration of the service. After the service and people kind of cleared out, I went to the woman who had been weeping and I said, you know, I just talked to her a little bit about her story and I was praying for her and I said, "It was really neat that your friend came up and came and sat with you for the service." She said, "It was really neat, but I'd never met that woman before in my life." She just said she couldn't stand to see me in pain and be alone for the service and so she came and she sat with her. That was a woman on mission.

Do you understand that every weekend people walk through these doors and they are convinced that because this building is so big, and there are so many people, this is going to be cold and unfriendly. They're intimated by the size of the building and by the size of the church. It is all of our responsibilities to make sure that doesn't happen—that the experience is warm and friendly, that when we see people looking like they are lost in the hallways, which is every weekend, we do something about that. When we see a single parent trying to figure out how to drop off three different children at three different locations we don't just say, "That's too bad". We enter in; we offer to help; we do something about it, and we recognize that from when someone pulls on to the parking lot to the moment they pull out of the parking lot, everything that happens matters.

Typically on my weekends when I don't preach—on a vacation weekend—I go to church somewhere else in town. I have pastor friends all over the city so I usually go to one of their churches. One particular Sunday I went to one of the churches of one of my pastor friends and I didn't know this but there was like this secret code in terms of the traffic flow. I was going against the traffic. I pulled in; by the time I figured it out, it was a mess. They were honking at me; they were yelling at me; they were pointing at me, and I was in a mess. *(laughter)* I was very embarrassed and finally got rearranged and finally found a parking place and took a deep breath. I sat there for a minute and I thought to myself: I do not want to go into that building. I just don't. I don't want to be with those people. I just wanted to go home. Now think of that. I'm a pastor, and the pastor of that church is a dear friend of mine, but I was this close to saying, "I'm out of here and I'm going home". From the moment someone pulls onto the property to the moment they pull off, everything matters. You see this most acutely when you yourself have been working on someone

next door, someone at work, a family member, and finally after months, maybe years, they finally choose to join you and you are acutely aware of everything that happens from the parking lot to the hallway to being in here, that something happens that's meaningful, that what happens on this platform matters. It all matters and it's important to realize that that's going on for someone every single week, and we all have a responsibility to be on mission when we gather.

All of the studies show the same thing—that if a person has not come to Jesus in those early child/teen years, the chance of that person coming into a relationship with Christ is dramatically diminished, which would mean strategically, as a church, we need to be very aware of the children and the youth that are among us every weekend. Do you realize that this morning alone there will be between 1000 and 1500 children and youth on this campus? We talk about the *next generation*. The next generation is here this morning. We have an awesome responsibility and privilege to pour into their lives and to be a part of equipping and discipling them for the future. I get weary of people that spend so much time complaining about the future but they are unwilling to do anything about it. So here's what I would say: If you find yourself complaining about the future, stop complaining. The future is today and they are in this building at this very moment. Instead of complaining, do something about it. Invest yourself in a child, in a teenager, in those people who will be the next generation to scatter. It's a tremendous privilege and opportunity.

For me personally, I think I will always be a youth pastor at heart. Patti and I love teenagers, always have, I think always will. I find that age of life to be so exciting. There's so much potential but it's also such a difficult journey that my heart goes out to these kids. I think that sometimes we underestimate how complicated it is to be a teenager these days and how much courage it takes as a teenager to stand for Jesus.

My preaching mentor was Haddon Robinson and Haddon Robinson used to say, “If I had to pick 10 heroes of the faith, 5 of them would be teenagers.” I'm totally on that page. I get that. But let me tell you what our teenagers don't need. They don't need critics; they have enough of those. They don't need rock throwers; they have enough of those. They don't need people rolling their eyes and giving up on them; they have enough of those. You know what they need? They need people who believe in them. They need people who cheerlead them. They need people that will say to them, “You know, you matter, and you're going to change this world.”

I think about my own story, and I think about growing up and, for whatever reason, there were those adults that believed that I mattered. I think of dear Ron Sperling. For whatever reason, from the time I was a kid, continually on a regular basis needed to remind me, "Hey, I believe in you," and I think you matter. He would tell me that over and over and over again. Forty years later Ron is still at Lincoln Berean and he stills says the same thing to me as recently as two weeks ago. I think of those people that believed in me—Charlie Williams, Jim Walker, Curt Lehman, Byron and Marilyn Anderson. These were adults that, for whatever reason, just believed in me, often when I did not believe in myself. And if somebody believed in me and convinced me that I matter, why wouldn't I do that for somebody else? Why wouldn’t I pass that on? Think for yourself, weren’t there people in your life at critical times that said, "Hey, I just want you to know that you matter and you matter to me."? If you were given that gift, why wouldn’t you take the time to give that gift to someone else and say, "I want you to know, I think you matter."

But it isn't just the church gathered. We are equipped; we're encouraged; we're built up, but then we scatter. It's the church here; it's the church there. You say, “Where's there?” There is everywhere that isn't here. It's everywhere. The church goes to work; the church goes to school; the church goes

to the coffee shop; the church goes to the neighborhood. The church goes everywhere, and we have a responsibility to rightly represent Jesus when we scatter. We go with the heart of a servant. We go with the heart of Jesus. We're not going to be angry. We're not going to pick a fight. We're not going to have an argument. We're going to serve. We're going to wash feet. We're going to rightly represent Jesus to the community. Again, it's vitally important to remember that this is not a method; it's not a technique; it's not a gimmick. It is rightly representing the heart of Jesus.

I would suggest to you that, because of where the culture is today, there has perhaps never been a greater opportunity for us as the church. This is why: We have fundamentally changed as a culture. We are now all about ourselves. It is about *me*. It's about the individual. It's far more about *me* than it is about *us*. This is a byproduct of determining that I'm going to be my own god. The system requires that I'm selfish. The individual comes first. I will, if necessary, disadvantage the community in order to advantage myself. I think a snapshot of our culture, pun intended, that captures what we've become is the "selfie". It is just who we are. Now think about it. At one time we gathered together and we had relationships and we enjoyed life together and there was a sense of community and, in the midst of that, perhaps someone would take a picture to capture it. Now I take a picture of myself because that's what matters most to me now.

Think about how we've changed. There was a time for example when music was something we did together. Now music is something we use to isolate ourselves from others. Movies used to be something people went to together; now it's something I watch alone on my device. It used to be that we played games to do something together. The very essence of the game wasn't the game; it was the social—it was being together. But now we play games by ourselves on our devices. We have become an isolated, individualistic culture, and the result of that is that we have become a lonely people. Study after study, after study, after study shows that we are becoming more and more lonely.

Sherry Turkle, in her thought provoking book *Alone Together*, talks about the fact that we gather with people, so we're *here*, but at the same time we'd like to be *there*. So we're here but we're also there, and so we're never fully present anywhere anymore. We can't stand to be alone together, alone anymore so when we're alone we want to be together with somebody there, so we're constantly texting and posting and trying to figure out a way to stay connected because we can't be alone. She makes the case, if we don't learn to be alone than we'll only continue to be more lonely.

In order to compensate, now we have this false sense of community that comes through technology. So we've convinced ourselves that nobody cares, nobody listens, so we artificially think that somebody is listening when we post and, " I have lots of friends". When we tweet and we twitter and whatever else we do, we're convincing ourselves, artificially, that somebody out there cares but the reality is that no one is listening and nobody out there cares. If that's true, and I believe it is, than imagine what it would be like if we as the people of God began to live counter to that. We live in a culture that doesn't like conversation anymore because conversation is messy, and it happens in real time and we can't control it. We don't do conversation so we text, cause you can control it. You can edit it; you can manage it; you can do it on your own time.

What if we change that and began to think in terms of relationship? What if we began to think in terms of conversation? What if we began to think of relationships with real human beings and what if most of the people in our world are actually very lonely, and we entered into their world with the heart of Jesus and said, "I want you to know you really matter". I'd like to get to know you; I'd like to ask you a bunch of questions. I'd like to know your hopes and your dreams. I'd like to know what

you think and what you feel and, rather than going into it, looking for a place where we can make a presentation, we're actually listening and caring and entering into that relationship, finding the point in that person's life where Jesus intersects in a meaningful way in order to have a conversation about the Jesus that has so changed our lives. It's not complicated. It's just about genuinely caring and pursuing people and valuing you people. I'll guarantee you, ask twenty questions and, before you're done, the conversation will turn to something spiritual. People are hungry for that which matters. It's not a gimmick; it's not a method; it's just representing the heart of Jesus.

I want to close this morning with a story that frankly I would rather not tell. I've been surprised this week how much emotion for me is still in this story, how much pain is still there. When Patti and I moved to California—we went to California for me to go to seminary; Talbot Seminary is on the campus of Biola University—we lived two or three blocks from the school, and probably half of the people in the apartment complex were Christians who were either Biola students or Talbot students. So fairly quickly we got to know the Christians and we began to gather and we began to do things and we began to learn from the Christians that had lived there longer than us about everybody else in the building. And we learned particularly about a couple to avoid. Their names were Don and Sandy. Don was an ex-marine. He was a big, burly guy, looked like life had been hard for him and he wasn't much for conversation. On one occasion I saw Don crash out of his apartment door with a shotgun in hand, running to the parking lot because somebody in the parking lot has tried to grab his wife. On one occasion I saw Don coming up the stairs to go to his apartment and one of the Christian students stopping him and beginning to give him a presentation of the gospel. Don got a few minutes into it and literally, physically flung this guy to the side, offered some expletives and went on his way. There was no question Don and Sandy were people to avoid.

But then something happened. Don and Sandy had a baby and Sandy had virtually no understanding of what to do with this baby. Both had grown up in difficult circumstances. She had no model and she was terrified. Patti and I didn't have kids yet but Patti had grown up around children her whole life; it was as natural as breathing to her. So through that somehow Patti made a connection with Sandy and it became a stronger and stronger connection. When I would come home from school, if I couldn't find Patti in the apartment, I always knew where she was. I would wander across the courtyard. She was always at Don and Sandy's. So I began to spend time at Don and Sandy's. Little by little we began to know them. They were warm; they were friendly; they were loving; they were caring. They were nothing like this picture that had been painted regarding who they were. As we began to spend more and more time with them and, frankly, we moved farther and farther out of the Christian crowd and more and more with Don and Sandy, they began to tell us stories of how deeply wounded they had been because of the Christians, how they had been rejected, how they had been turned away, how they had been made fun of—how they had been deeply, deeply hurt by these people who had rejected them. And as Patti and I were listening to them, they never said it by name, but we couldn't escape the fact that the people they were talking about included us.

It is a very sobering thing to sit face to face with people you now care about and listen to the damage you have done to the cause of Christ—and I felt so ashamed. I felt a deep pain and I began to wonder what had happened to me. What had happened to my heart? At one time in my spiritual journey did I forget that I was nothing more than a sinner saved by grace? At what point did I become this arrogant, self-righteous, hypocrite that was doing so much damage in the name of Christ. It was a very painful time of looking in the mirror and trying to figure out where I had lost my way. By the time Patti and I had moved away from California, Don and Sandy had become our dearest friends. Sadly we never saw Don and Sandy come to Christ. We can only hope that maybe we repaired some of the damage that we had done to them. Don and Sandy's little girl that started

this whole relationship was named Ashley. When Patti and I had our first daughter, we very intentionally named her Ashley in order that we would never forget the lesson that we learned from that painful chapter in our lives.

It is a sobering mission to take the love and the compassion of Jesus into the streets. May we rightly represent Jesus to the world around us.

Our Father, we're thankful this morning that you love us. Lord, we're reminded that Jesus washed the feet of arrogant, self-righteous, hypocritical disciples. Lord, I'm thankful for that because that disciple was me. God, none of us want to be that person, so help us to remember we're just sinners saved by grace. And, Lord, help us too, with compassion and kindness, with a heart of a servant, rightly represent the message of Jesus to the people around us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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