

Communion weekend- The Grace of Jesus Christ: Costly Humiliation

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Preacher: Ian Hamilton

[0 : 00] Well, I'm very grateful to your minister for the kind invitation to be here. Aberdeen has a very prominent place in my heart and in Joan's heart. Joan studied here a long time ago.

Our eldest son David studied here. I spent a year as an assistant minister in the Church of Scotland in Northfield. We have some very dear, precious friends in Aberdeen. Aberdeen was very formative in our lives. For myself, it persuaded me. My one year in Northfield, which I loved, it persuaded me that God was calling me not to theological teaching but to preach the gospel of his son. And I remember the days well, and I'm thankful to God that Father was looking around as we were singing, thinking, do I really know anyone here? And then I looked up and saw Alec, and that was just great. So, we are thankful to be here, and I trust as we consider God's Word this warning that we will hear God Himself by His Spirit speak into our lives. On Friday evening, we considered something of the wonderful grace of Jesus Christ as He restored His servant Peter, who had so publicly and so egregiously denied Him three times. And then last evening, we considered something of the exquisite sympathy of Jesus Christ, how in His humanity He has entered into the arena of this world and into the arena of our flesh, that He might understand from within what it means to be truly human. And because He is truly human, and because He has experienced in His unfallenness the temptations that assail us, He is able thereby, because of who He is, to minister the tender-hearted, generous-hearted, loving-hearted grace of God to His people. We can always be sure that in our times of trial and trouble, and especially perhaps when temptations suddenly or slowly but powerfully come upon us, that we have in Jesus Christ, the great heavenly sympathizer who understands our humanity not by mere omniscience, but by experience, because He is truly bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. And this morning, I want to continue this theme of considering Jesus Christ by focusing with you on His costly humiliation, His wonderful grace, His tender-hearted sympathy, and now in particular,

His costly humiliation. And the verse that I want in particular to highlight this morning is verse 27.

For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table, but I am among you as one who serves? Jesus is defining Himself. He is demarcating who He is.

If you want to understand Me, He is saying, you'll need to get this. I am among you, not as someone who has come to be served. I am among you as one who has come to serve. I wonder if you've ever considered why it was that the early Christian church made such a huge impact on the ancient world. Have you ever pondered why was it that this small group of men and women, boys and girls scattered throughout the Roman Empire, a little community of faith here and a little community of faith there, how was it that they made such a remarkable, huge, seismic impact on the ancient world? They had no campaigns.

[4 : 40] There were no programs. There were no special events. No special meetings. There was no anything. What was it then that impacted so profoundly the ancient world? Well, very simply this, they lived differently. They preached Jesus Christ, yes, absolutely. They witnessed to Jesus Christ, Christ. But what gave weight to their preaching of Christ and to their witnessing to Christ was the lives that they were living. They lived a different kind of life from what the ancient world was used to seeing.

They lived differently. And this is what impacted the ancient world. It could not make sense. It couldn't square the circle of these lives.

And the reason why was because their lives were patterned after the life of their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I am among you as one who serves. Or in the words of Mark 10, 45, I've come not to be served, but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many.

This was a model of life unheard of in the ancient world. Kings and rulers and lords were not there to serve. They were there to be served. But here was another king from another world who was bringing another pattern of life into the ancient world. Jesus' words here in Luke 22 come at a very significant time in His earthly life and ministry. The shadow of the cross has already begun to penetrate the human soul of our Lord Jesus Christ. Soon He's going to be overwhelmed with anguish in the garden of Gethsemane to the point of praying, Father, if it's possible, let this cup, this cup of suffering for the sins of the world pass from me. He's going to be almost overwhelmed with anguish in the garden of Gethsemane.

And then He is going to be overwhelmed by the experience of becoming the sin-bearing, sin-atonement sacrifice for the people of God on Calvary's cross. And the shadow of that cross and all that it will mean for Him, and as yet He cannot fully comprehend what it will mean for Him. In His humanity, He's not omniscient. That's why He trembles. That's why an angel from heaven will come, as later in Luke 22 we read.

[7 : 54] An angel from heaven needs to come to support and sustain Him as He pursues relentlessly His mission and calling to be the Savior of God. And as He walks resolutely, if I dare to say tremblingly, towards that ultimate moment of destiny, Jesus pauses to teach His disciples a fundamental lesson in authentic Christian discipleship. You would think Jesus would be wholly absorbed in Himself. You would think that His mind could not cope with anything other than trying to face all the unimaginable suffering that yet awaited Him. But here we find Him pausing in His relentless march to Calvary's cross to teach His disciples this fundamental lesson in authentic Christian living, the living that was going to turn the ancient world upside down.

Now, Jesus' disciples were exasperating, and that should give us a crumb of comfort because I'm sure none of us is any less exasperating than Jesus' disciples. They were always letting Him down. They were often speaking out of turn.

At times He said to them, O foolish and slow of heart to believe, how much longer do I have to bear with you? And we can identify with them, can't we? They're just like us.

Jesus, as we read, has just inaugurated the first Lord's Supper. He has set before them in symbol, His broken body and His poured out blood. He has told them that one of them will soon betray Him, and that they would all desert Him. And the atmosphere must have been electric. There must have been a frisson of bewilderment as the disciples watch Jesus enacting this supper, and then hear Him tell them that one of them that one of them that one of them is going to betray Him. And all of them are going to desert Him.

You would think a deep solemnity would have been resting weightily on these men. But then we read this, a dispute arose among them as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.

[10 : 58] You think, are you serious? The Lord Jesus Christ is speaking about His body that will soon be broken, the blood that's going to be shed, and you're arguing among yourselves as to which of you will be the greatest. If we look at the other gospel accounts, Matthew and Mark in particular, you'll find that there was this heated controversy initiated, interestingly, by the mother of James and John.

And the other disciples were really annoyed with James and John, not because, I'm sure, they were thinking, what a terrible thing you're talking about to the Savior at this solemn moment. I think they were thinking, would that we had taken the initiative. We want to be the greatest. We want to be on the chairs of authority in the heavenly kingdom. If we compare the timing with what we read here, with John's gospel, it seems shortly before this Jesus had washed the disciples' feet. This was a job for the lowest of the lowest of the servants, but not one of the disciples would stoop down to wash another disciples' feet. And so the Lord of glory takes off His outer garments. You'll remember John 13,

He ties a towel round His waist, and the disciples are looking with utter bewilderment. What's He doing? What's He doing? He's washing our feet. And Peter, you'll remember, says, Lord, you're not going to wash my feet. That's demeaning. That's not for the likes of you. That's for the lowest of the lowest of the servants. And Jesus says, Peter, if I don't wash your feet, you've got no part in me. I've come not to be served, but to serve and to give my life a ransom for many.

And so there's this dispute as to which of them is going to be the greatest. And Jesus pauses in His march to Calvary's cross to tell them, that's how the world thinks. The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, but not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become the youngest, the leader as one who serves. For who is greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as one who serves. I am among you as one who serves. What is Jesus teaching His disciples? That in the eyes of God, greatness consists in service and not status. Greatness consists in service and not status.

The New York Times, I think, had an interesting article some time ago. It was analyzing the reason why companies fail. Companies fail. Companies fail because of pride, overweening self-confidence.

[14 : 43] And the Bible would just give a hearty amen to that. What was the first great mother sin? That of Satan, who sought to exalt himself above God. And it's remarkable to read through the Bible and to realize that pride lies at the heart of human sin. Most of you will know the word Sodom. We talk about Sodomy and Sodomites. Sodom was a place in the Bible. We read about it in the book of Genesis.

God condemned it and judged it. And if you were to ask people, Christian people who know their Bibles a little, what was the great sin of Sodom? Oh, they say it's the same sin as today. Flagrant, flagitious, immorality, sexual perversion. Well, that's not actually what the Bible says.

That wasn't the great sin of Sodom. Ezekiel chapter 16. The Lord will expose the sin of Sodom, and this is the guilt of Sodom. She and her daughters have pride.

It was pride, self-will, self-aggrandizement that gave birth to the perversions. But pride was the root of the reason. And this is what so impacted the ancient world. They were encountering people who served one another, who didn't wait to be served, but who served, who went out of their way.

So, with that in mind, let me just highlight two very simple things regarding what we read here in verse 27, but I am among you as one who serves. First of all, consider just for a moment who Jesus is.

[16 : 46] But I, I am among you. Who is this one who became a servant? Who is this one who washed disciples' feet?

Who is this one who came not to be served, but to serve? He is the Son of God who is from everlasting to everlasting. Remember how the gospel of John one begins, in the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things were made by Him. Without Him, nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life, and that life was the light of men. Who is this one who came to be a servant?

He is the servant. He is the everlasting God. The greatest somebody who ever was became the greatest nobody the world had ever seen. The greatest somebody who ever was became the greatest nobody the world had ever seen. This is our servant king as we were singing. The greatest somebody became a servant of wretched judgment, deserving sinners. You know, if it wasn't in the Bible, you wouldn't believe it. You would think, this is fantasy land. This is something that George Lucas has dreamed up.

This is J.R.R. Tolkien or C.S. Lewis, but it's the Word of God. The greatest somebody who ever was became a servant.

Isn't it remarkable that in all of the gospel accounts of our Lord's life, on only one occasion does He speak with self-conscious personal reference to Himself? Only once does He engage self-reflectively with His attributes. And what is it He says? Matthew 11, Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart. What kind of a God is this? A God who is gentle and humble of heart. This is what so astonished the ancient world broke all their categories of intellectual apprehension. They couldn't make sense at first. A God, you worship God, but you tell us He came into this world. There's a very famous depiction on a catacomb in Rome, and it has the figure of a donkey on a cross.

[19 : 57] A donkey on a cross. That's what the ancient world thought. God? How could He be God? He's dying on a cross. He's laying down His life. He's serving others. If He's God and He's a King, He should be demanding tribute. The greatest somebody who ever was became the greatest nobody the world had ever seen.

That's who is speaking here. Hands that flung stars into space. The Bible is very frustrating, isn't it? Especially the Old Testament narrative. Hebrew narrative really gets my goat at times, you say. What I mean by that is this. Hebrew narrative just, you know, trundles along. It almost never stops to make value judgments or give theological comment. It expects you to join up the dots.

And so you read Genesis 1, which by the way isn't poetry, it's history. It's not Hebrew poetry. It's not Hebrew poetry. Nothing to do with Hebrew poetry. And you go through Genesis 1.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And you know how it goes on. And then you come to this. Is it verse 17 or 18? And He also made the stars. And the Hebrew simply says, and the stars.

And you think, wow. Don't you want to stop there and give us a lovely dissertation on the vastnesses of space and the uncountable myriads of star systems and God did it. No, just hand the stars and on it goes.

[21 : 44] Hands that flung stars into space. Stoops down and washes feet. And then takes that spirit of servanthood to the cross.

So, secondly, and very briefly, consider what it meant for Jesus to be our servant. You see, His foot washing of the disciples was not the depths of His servanthood.

It must have seemed like that to the disciples. When you read John 13, you almost feel palpably the tension, the bewilderment.

But what's He doing? What's He doing? Washing feet? But compared to what was about to happen, that was as nothing.

Because to secure our good, and as our servant, He would go to any lengths to secure our good. To secure our good, He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of a cross, as Paul puts it in Philippians 2.

[23 : 01] Even the death of a cross. The cross wasn't simply a place of Roman execution. It was a place of Jewish execration.

Cursed be anyone who hangs upon a tree. It was a public sign that God had abandoned you and finished with you. It was the unimaginable death for a Jew.

But Jesus had come to be abandoned by God. He had come to take the abandonment that our sin deserved upon Himself. He had come to endure the darkness and the humiliation of being abandoned that we might never be.

The cross is where we see in all its splendid, technicolored beauty, the servanthood of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

The cross is where we see the Lord of glory, ignored, despised, and rejected. Jesus Christ is the great deacon of the church.

[24 : 15] You know, it always amazes me when I talk to people in churches and they say, oh, we've just appointed deacons. I said, oh, what kind of... Well, we needed men who were practically minded.

And my heart just plunges to the floor. Do you know the only two qualifications that the early church had for being a deacon? You had to be filled with the Holy Spirit and be full of wisdom, Acts 6.

It doesn't say you had to be good with a hammer, good with a paintbrush, good with figures. You had to be filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom. Because Jesus Christ is the great deacon of the church.

The word simply means to serve, to serve. He had come to serve. And that's why the New Testament, if we time, we look at Paul's letters, how often he impresses on the pastors to whom he writes, Timothy in particular, you're called to serve your people, not to lord it over them.

Elders are not to lord it. They're to be noted for being servant-hearted, like their Savior. And that's why the ancient world was so bemused at first by these Christians, and so angered and persecuted, and then found themselves attracted, because they said, your leaders serve you.

[25 : 39] Your leaders don't wait for you to come to them. They go to you. They visit you. They care for you. Who are the most Christ-like Christians?

They are the most servant-hearted Christians. They are the most servant-hearted Christians. Do you think here this morning you're a somebody?

Well, the greatest somebody who ever was became the greatest nobody the world had ever seen. And that's why Paul writes to the Philippians, let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus.

The mind that brought him from the glory of God into the fallenness and brokenness of this world. The mind that brought him not to wait to be served, but to go out of his way to serve.

The mind that brought him to give his all to secure the good of the people of God. And that's what the Lord's Supper is testifying to.

[26 : 55] Do you see with your eyes? Do you see the servant who became a nobody that you might really become a somebody?

When you hold the bread and take the wine and drink it, are you tasting the greatest somebody who ever was who became the greatest nobody the world had ever seen?

Because God wants us not only to hear about his son. He wants us to look with our eyes and handle with our hands and taste with our mouths.

The servanthood of his son, our savior, Jesus Christ. So he said, I am among you as one who serves.

What sort of impact are our lives, your life, my life making on this world? We live in a world that's full of itself.

[28 : 01] What does the world see in our witness to Jesus Christ? Are our lives, is my life, your life, is it giving weight to our witness?

You know, we're far too concerned about knowing how best to speak to people. And some of us perhaps feel very acutely, temperamentally, that we struggle with words.

And brothers and sisters, it's not our words, their fluency or their lack of them or their theological insightfulness of them that actually impacts people.

It's words spoken out of lives that reflect Jesus Christ. That means a lot to me because that's actually how I was converted to Christ.

Being confronted with a life that gave weight to what the person said to me. So much so that I actually don't remember him saying anything to me.

[29 : 13] Although he later said he was always talking to me. Don't remember anything. But I remember the weight of his life. That's what turned the world upside down. The life of the servant king manifested in the lives of those united to him by saving faith.

So may God help us to come to the Lord's table this morning with thankful hearts. Not coming because we think we're worthy.

We come because we're unworthy. There isn't a trace of worthiness. When Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11, let a man examine himself. He's not saying look for crumbs of worthiness.

He's saying look to see that you have a heart that loves the Savior and that loves his people.

In a moment we'll sing some words from the 118th Psalm. David has asked me to say that we remain seated for the singing.

[30 : 27] And that those who wish to participate and share in the Lord's Supper during the singing of the Psalm. Should occupy the seats that he previously indicated to us.

So as we come to the Lord's Supper, let us do so with thankful hearts. And let us do so conscious that all our worthiness lies outside of ourself.

In our Savior, Jesus Christ. So let's sing the words of the 118th Psalm. Triumphant shouts of joy resound in places where the righteous dwell.

Psalm 118, we sing verses 15 through 24.