

Servant Leadership

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on John

In the Gospel of John, we have seen Jesus doing work that no one else had ever done before — making water into wine, giving sight to the blind, raising the dead. Now he does what almost anyone can do, but what few want to. He washes feet. The king does the work of a slave.

In doing so, Jesus brings to a head the question that has been following us the entire course of John's Gospel—to what extent is Jesus' work an example for our own work? It would be easy to answer, "Not at all." None of us are the Lord. None of us die for the sins of the world. But when he washes the disciples' feet, Jesus explicitly tells them — and by extension us — that we are to follow his example. "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example" (John 13:14-15). Jesus is an example we are meant to follow, so far as we are able.

This attitude of humble service should accompany all we do. If the CEO walks the production floor, it should be as if coming to wash the assembly workers' feet. So, too, the gas station attendant should clean the bathroom floors as if being there to wash the motorists' feet. This is not so much a matter of action as attitude. Both the CEO and the gas station attendant can probably serve people better through other activities than washing feet, even if their employees or customers were willing. But they should see

themselves as performing humble service. Jesus, the Spirit-filled teacher who reigns over the entire cosmos, deliberately performs a concrete act of lowly service to demonstrate what ought to be the habitual attitude of his people. By doing so, he both dignifies and demands from his followers humble acts of service. Why? Because doing so brings us tangibly face to face with the reality that godly work is performed for the benefit of others, not merely for the fulfillment of ourselves.