

Get your elbows off the table, Pastor Greg

By Pastor Greg
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John 13:1-17

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When I was 7 or 8 years old, my mother told me something that stuck with me for years. She sat me down at the kitchen table, looked me square in the eyes, and told me I was special because I was a child of God. Now before you start thinking "Oh, how sweet", ask yourself why would she tell me this in the first place. Why did she think I needed to know this? Now that I am a parent it has become clear to me that I must have been particularly bad that week, and she thought this bit of information might change things. Well, it did. Only, not quite the way mom had hoped. You see, once I possessed this new knowledge about myself, I came to church with a whole new understanding about me. I was a child of God. God took one look at me and saw that I was special. And I remember looking at the rest of the children in Sunday school and wondering if they knew that me and God were tight. Somehow, I don't think this was what mom had in mind.

I now know that each of us can become a child of God because of the sacrifice of Jesus upon the cross. Through His death, the penalty of our sinfulness is paid. In church language we call this redemption or redeemed. According to Paul, when we confess Jesus as Lord and Savior, we become a child of God. *²⁶ For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷ And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God's promise to Abraham belongs to you.*¹ (Galatians 3:26-29) These are wonderful testimonies of what makes us special as believers in Christ. And I know these teachings make us feel all warm and fuzzy inside. But why do you suppose Paul mentioned this to the Galatian Christians? Why did they need to be reminded of this?

¹Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

I want you to notice what Paul says in chapter 5. Listen to these words. ⁷ *You were running the race so well. Who has held you back from following the truth?* ⁸ *It certainly isn't God, for he is the one who called you to freedom.* ⁹ *This false teaching is like a little yeast that spreads through the whole batch of dough!* ¹⁰ *I am trusting the Lord to keep you from believing false teachings. God will judge that person, whoever he is, who has been confusing you.* ² (Galatians 5:7-9) Do you hear this? These Christians began with such vigor; such enthusiasm. But something or someone has hindered their growth by getting their minds all tied up in the Law.

The biggest problem for these early Christians was not the persecutions they suffered, but focusing their minds on the Laws of Moses. And when you set your mind on obeying the law, the natural tendency is to compare your level of obedience with the next guy. And this created smug, "Me" oriented Christians. Sure, the Christians in this church believed in the redemptive work of Jesus, but they became ensnared by methods and legalism that led to arguments and divisions among the group.

Neither Paul nor our Savior feel this is appropriate behavior for a group of believers. Paul repeats the words of Jesus by reminding everyone that, *"the whole law can be summed up in this one command: Love your neighbor as yourself."* ³ (Galatians 5:14) In other words, we must not merely focus on what Christ did for us. We must be focused on what we should do for others as well. We cannot be "Me" oriented in our Christianity.

As Jesus and His disciples gathered in the Upper Room prior to His arrest, Jesus holds the first communion service. He tells them that the bread represents His body that will be soon broken for them, and the wine represents His blood that will be poured out for the forgiveness of sin. "Do this in remembrance of Me" He commands. But there was a problem in that room that neither bread nor cup could resolve. Only water, a basin, and a towel would solve the division that was brewing between believers. It seems that everyone in the group was "Me" oriented. They

²Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

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wanted recognition for the depth of their spirituality. So Jesus gives them an example they would not soon forget **(Read John 13:1-17)**.

There is a difference between knowing who Jesus is, and being His follower. Being only a believer tends to make people see themselves as I did when I was a child; as someone special and chosen by God. A believer will look at their own Christian life and see how much better their belief is than those around them. And it doesn't take long for legalism to raise its ugly head once we feel our belief and our methods are the most favored in the eyes of God. To combat this attitude; this "Me" oriented Christianity, Jesus says "Do as I have done to you".

(Feet Washing Demonstration)

There's one thing I notice about washing someone's feet. I cannot accomplish this by setting around with my elbows on the table. I may look all pious and holy as I sit at the table with the Bread and the Cup before me. With my hands folded in prayer I think about all that Jesus has done for me. But if I understand what Jesus is trying to teach here in John 13, I have not been fully obedient to His teachings until I learn to serve others. And if I refuse, I run the risk of becoming a "Me" oriented Christian; a believer who focus all his attention upon God, and who believe He focuses all His attention upon them. I believe that's why Jesus tells us to roll up our sleeves, get our elbows off the table, and serve one another. It is a reminder to us that according to Jesus the depth of our holiness and reverence is measured by the level of our service toward others. And we best honor the Lord when we honor those around us.