

## John 13:1-17

As a way of introducing this passage once, a professor by the name of Bruce Waltke, talked to his class about the experience of babysitting and, in particular, how common it was for parents to, just as they are walking out the door, unload a whole bunch of last minute instructions. In reflecting on this behavior in himself, and in seeing it in others over the years, Waltke observed that the instructions typically given by parents on these occasions are usually pretty significant - the ones you want to make sure the babysitter doesn't forget (e.g., the asthma medicine), the things that you want to make sure they heard and understood. Of course, not *all* such instructions are deeply significant (e.g., let the dog out) - but they often are.

Something like that, says Waltke, is taking place between Jesus and his disciples, at this point in John's Gospel. Previous to this section we have spent 12 chapters looking at a summary of Jesus' life and words. In the process, we have covered the last three years of Jesus' earthly life - everything, that is, except for the last few days of his life. That's where we are now. That's where chapter 13 picks up. And, while chapters 13-21 are roughly equivalent in *size* to the chapters that precede them, the *time* period covered in this last half of the Gospel is very compressed. Jesus is, literally, "walking out the door" - about to leave. He's not going for good. But he's going for a while. And as he leaves, he has some important things to say. Things he doesn't want them to forget. Things they are going to need to know - for now, and for some time to come.

Now, as those of you who have been with us recently will know, John's Gospel was written for the specific purpose of evangelizing its readers in order that they might come to believe in Jesus and trust him as their Savior. We know this is the case because John tells us so in Chapter 20.

In order to accomplish this goal John has structured his Gospel, as we have seen, so that the first 12 chapters present us with a highly selective biography of Jesus - recording his public life and ministry. The next 5 chapters reveal some of his most treasured and intimate conversations with his disciples - in other words, some of his private life and ministry. And the final 4 chapters record for us the most significant events of Jesus' life - the reason for which he came - the big climax toward which this story has been moving - Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

And so, within those large structures, we find ourselves this morning at the beginning of that middle section where, as one writer puts it, Jesus turns his attention from the world to those who had been given him *out of* the world.

Now, before we turn to look at the passage itself I want to make one preliminary observation that helps set the stage for what we are about to see. As you will likely know, in the New Testament, in addition to the Gospel of John, there are three other "Gospels" or biographies of Jesus. Each one of these biographies were written for slightly different purposes, with slightly different audiences in mind. And each one of them is reflecting on Jesus' life - a life that - as John's Gospel tells us - was *so full of meaning* that you couldn't possibly give an exhaustive description of it - even if you filled the whole world with books about it.

What that means is that each account of his life is very selective, and has to be if the Bible is to be of any practical use for God's people. Accordingly, you will not find the exact same materials in each Gospel. Some things are found in all four of them. Some things are found in a few of them. Some things are unique to each Gospel. As a result, the various Gospels serve to "fill in the blanks" for each others.

Now, I say all of that just so I can say this: One of the ways that John "fills in the blanks" for the other Gospels is that it gives us, in much more detail, this very important teaching that Jesus' gave to his followers at the very end. Conversely, one of the ways that the other Gospels "fill in the blanks" for us in John's Gospel is that they provide for us a fuller account of some of the EVENTS that took place in these crucial last days of Jesus life.

Specifically, one event that took place on the very occasion that John describes for us in chapter 13 - but which John chooses not to include - for whatever reason, is one found in Luke 22:24-27,

*A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.<sup>25</sup> And he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors.<sup>26</sup> But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.<sup>27</sup> 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 the one who serves.*

Keeping that event and those words in mind, hear now the words of John 13:1-17, an event which took place on the very same occasion and which, I would suggest, was in many ways a direct response to this troubling dispute that had arisen among the disciples....

(Read John 13:1-17 and pray)

The first thing I want to draw your attention to is verse 1 of chapter 13 - a verse which, it seems to me, functions as a sort of preface to everything that follows - and by that I mean not only the section just read to you but in some ways the remainder of this Gospel. As we have already seen, we are down to the last days and hours of Jesus' earthly life. A series of momentous events are soon going to take place - a universe of meaning will be crammed into a very small passage of time. And, in that light, the statement here that Jesus "loved his own *to the end*" seems particularly ominous. That "end" - that "big moment" - is almost upon us. And verse 13:1 signals that for us nicely. Everything that is about to take place - indeed everything that has already happened - all of it is a function of Jesus' love for "his own" who were in the world. That is the background, the atmosphere in which the whole drama of his life is played out. Thinking about the love of Jesus as expressed here, John Piper writes,

*"We are moved to believe that someone loves us when two things appear—they stick with us over time, and they stick with us when it is costly. These are the two things I see here in this verse: having loved us over the years (patient with all our sin and misunderstanding) he now loved us to the uttermost, to the depths of suffering for us.*

*This is what we long for, and this is what we have by faith—an experience of being loved with a love that lasts, that is not fickle, or uncertain, or capricious, but durable, constant, stable. But not only a love that is extensive, that lasts over time .... but also a love that is intensive. We long to be loved radically, deeply, excessively, passionately.”*

And, I might add, *sacrificially*. And this extensive and intensive love that drove Jesus to a sacrificial death on the cross is the same love that now drives him to his knees *before he gets to the cross....*

**John 13:2-5** *During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, <sup>3</sup> Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, <sup>4</sup> rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. <sup>5</sup> Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.*

After seeing the great love of Jesus for his own, the second thing I want us to think about this morning is the deep significance of this simple yet profound act of service - this foot washing - performed by the Lord Jesus.

The disciples have gathered with Jesus for a meal and, it seems to me, the atmosphere on this occasion had to have been fairly tense. Jesus is, and has been for some time, under intense scrutiny by the religious leaders (read: thugs) who are, at that very moment, plotting to take his life. Jesus himself has been talking to his disciples of late about strange things - about death and coming back to life, indeed - bewildering things; things that they are not sure what to do with. Judas, the text tells us, in cooperation with the Devil, has finally crossed the line from troubled follower to committed traitor. And the disciples, they've got their own issues - getting caught up in petty, childish arguments about who is going to be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. They've spent three years with Jesus now and are still doing the same stupid stuff. And it is in that sort of context - in that highly charged atmosphere that Jesus gets up and starts washing some feet.

Now, if you're not aware, foot washing was a common thing in that day, although it might well seem a little strange to you and me. We live in the day of socks, stockings, closed leather and cotton or canvas shoes, running water and solid concrete or asphalt streets. Foot washing is not a big part of our culture because it doesn't need to be.

But it wasn't that way in Jesus' day. There were no paved roads. People didn't typically wear closed shoes but, instead, either wore some sort of sandal or wore nothing at all on their feet. And so if you lived back then, your feet got dirty. A lot. As a result it was standard practice, on most occasions, that when you came into a home as a guest there would be some sort of foot washing that took place upon entering the house.

However, even though foot washing was a standard practice, that is not to say that it was something that one personally did within a Jewish household. And the reason for that is because, while *necessary*, it was still considered to be a dirty and lowly practice and, as such, was typically relegated to a servant to perform or, at the very least, to a person who was lower on the social ladder than you.

That was the way things typically worked out. On this occasion, however, it would seem that, contrary to usual practice, the disciples and Jesus had gathered together - but no foot washing had yet taken place - as it usually would have been as they came into the home. Clearly the necessary items for doing so were present. But apparently there was no one present to perform the duty or, to put it more pointedly, there was no one present who was *willing* to perform the duty.

And so the evening began without it. And then, some time later, Jesus gets up to perform the task that no one else was willing to perform. What the motivation was for his getting up when he did, we cannot fully know. It may have been, as we've already seen, the ridiculous argument that the disciples had gotten into. It certainly seems a fitting response to that sort of thing. Or it may have been something else. More than likely, it was a combination of things.

The one thing that is clear is that it was something that no one expected Jesus to do. And the manner in which it was done, together with the events that accompanied it, point to the fact that there was much more going on here than Jesus' simply taking a moment to provide an object lesson in humility for his disciples. To be sure, there were lessons of that sort to be learned, as we will see in a moment. But there was more to be communicated than just that.

And the fact that the foot washing takes place at an unusual and awkward time, I believe, is the first clue to this. The second clue that we are to see something in this beyond the mere foot washing itself is the qualifying language that John uses as he describes the event that takes place. John could have simply said: *Jesus rose, took a towel and wrapped it around him, grabbed a bowl of water and started washing the disciples feet.* John could have simply said that.

But instead, in between the words describing the ACTIONS of Jesus, John includes other *descriptions* that make sure we don't miss the deep *significance* of this action, from various angles. John makes sure that we know that at the time Jesus performs this action he is fully aware of the fact that death was not far away. John reminds us that Jesus has already, *consistently*, shown his love for his disciples - no more proof was needed. Further, John reminds us that Jesus was fully aware that one of his own disciples was about to betray him, and that he was the one who had been given all things by the Father. *That* Jesus - the person who did not NEED to do what he did, who was not in any way REQUIRED to do what he did and who, in fact, had the biggest and best reasons in the entire universe for NOT doing it - *that is the Jesus who nevertheless stood up, dressed himself like a common servant, knelt down, and started washing his disciples dirty, smelly feet.* This is not just another foot-washing. This is the most amazing and unlikely foot washing to have ever taken place. And John wants to make sure we don't miss that.

The third indicator that we need to look a little deeper than just the foot washing itself is the conversation that takes place with Peter in the *midst* of the foot washing. Up until this point in the proceedings, the other disciples have, apparently, not had anything to say. Or perhaps they didn't know *what* to say. But Peter, never one to miss a chance to say the wrong thing, jumps right in. Now, a number of things are worth noticing in that conversation so let's take a couple minutes to pull it apart.....

When it comes time for Jesus to wash Peter's feet, for the first time he encounters resistance. Peter's first reaction to Jesus here is *incredulity*. He simply cannot believe that Jesus is doing this. Indeed, some commentators have suggested that there may even be a hint of *disgust* in Peter's voice over the fact that Jesus has humiliated himself in such a way. But where is all this coming from? What is it about Jesus' action that Peter can't seem to accept? One writer, named Temple, makes a helpful suggestion when he says,

“....we rather shrink from this revelation. We are ready, perhaps, to be humble before God; but we do not want Him to be humble in His dealings with us. We should like Him, who has the right, to glory in His goodness and greatness; then we, as we pass from His presence, may be entitled to pride ourselves on such achievements as distinguish us above other men.....man's humility does not begin with the giving of service; it begins with the readiness to receive it. For there can be much pride and condescension in our giving of service.”

In other words, perhaps one of the things that shocked and bothered Peter about this whole exercise is the fact that Jesus' actions render Peter, and everyone else in the room, without an excuse. After all, nobody else had bothered to take up this thankless task. To put it another way: Jesus' humility ruins things for everyone else. It irritatingly exposes his followers for the frauds and pretenders that they are. That WE are. Even more, if *he* serves in that way, then all of *our* excuses are revealed for the false and weak pretensions that they are. We can no longer pull rank or claim a personal exemption.

Well, in response to Peter's incredulity, Jesus calmly points out to his beloved, confused, impetuous friend that he knows Peter doesn't understand what is going on at the moment but he assures him that a day is coming when he *will* understand. In saying this Jesus is foreshadowing some comments he will be making to them soon enough - in chapters 14 and 16 - about the person and work of the Holy Spirit who will, after Jesus has returned to the Father, be the Father's on-going agent of comfort and empowerment and will, in fact, continue the inscripturation process by which Jesus' actions will be further explained and understood and canonized in the Scriptures of the New Testament. All that is currently cloudy in Peter's mind will be made very clear soon enough.

Nevertheless, and in spite of what Jesus says to him, Peter continues to blunder his way forward. One might easily forgive Peter for being shocked and thrown off guard initially by Jesus' actions. Who wouldn't be? But now, after Jesus has pointed out to him that he doesn't understand what is going on and that, therefore - by implication - Peter needs to drop his objections, trust that Jesus knows what he is doing, and get with the program - *after all of that*

Peter *still* objects and protests in a typically exaggerated fashion that he will *never* allow Jesus to wash his feet. As one commentator points out, “ignorance is often followed by obstinacy”. “You shall NEVER wash my feet”, says Peter. Now “never” usually lasts a long time. But in Peter’s case, it lasted only a few seconds.

As soon as these words are out of his mouth, Jesus very quickly points out to Peter the glaring flaw in what he has just said. This is a foot in mouth moment if ever there was one for, as one writer has said, “to reject grace in principle is to reject grace, period.” In other words, if Peter will not allow his master to perform this admittedly menial task for him, how can he even pretend to accept the greater humility of the cross? If Peter will not allow *this* - how could he possibly accept the mind-blowing condescension that saw the very Son of God clothe himself with both our *flesh* and our *sin*, and then submit to the shame and injustice and cruelty of public crucifixion? And so Jesus rightly and immediately takes Peter to the heart of the issue: “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” Not, “If I do not wash you, then your feet will remain dirty” but “If I don’t wash you, it’s OVER.” If Peter can’t accept this, then he’s in a world of trouble because what Jesus does here is NOTHING compared to what he’s about to do. *He’s about to wash Peter’s very soul.*

Well, with this last remark Jesus seems to get Peter’s attention. That’s the good news. And so in a way that is not surprising at all - given Peter’s personality - he does a complete reversal, extracting himself from the ditch on one side of the road only to over-correct and land himself in a ditch on the other side, demonstrating that while he does sort of “get” what Jesus is saying - at least enough to recognize the foolishness of what he has *just* said - he clearly *doesn’t* fully understand - just as Jesus said he wouldn’t.

And so Peter goes from saying he will NEVER let Jesus wash him to asking Jesus to wash him ALL OVER. But in saying this, Peter is again missing the point. It’s not the area or amount of skin that gets washed by Jesus that is the issue here. Jesus’ purpose is not to model for them methods of personal hygiene. Besides, as Jesus points out in verse 10, for him to wash anything more than Peter’s feet in this instance would be superfluous. The rest of Peter’s body is fine. From a practical standpoint, it’s just his feet that need washing.

What Jesus is modeling for Peter, and what his actions are pointing to, is the reality that is looming large on the horizon. That great and final work on the cross - that supreme act of humble service of which his foot washing is only a mere preview. What Jesus wants is for his dear friend to be willing to submit to the un-deserved, un-expected, scandalous, humbling grace that is being offered to him - whether in the simple act of foot-washing or in the greater act of self-sacrifice to come. Because, as Jesus has already made clear, apart from accepting that there can be no fellowship with him.

That is the nature of fellowship with Jesus. It is the fellowship of the washed. And there is simply no coming to Jesus in any other way. You cannot hold on to your good self-opinion and expect that Jesus will be of any use to you. You have to either let go of it, and accept the cleansing that is graciously given or else you can hang on to it, and carry it with you into hell, like some deadly weight tied to your ankle, dragging you into the depths of the sea.

Well, after the foot-washing is over, Jesus, expert communicator that he is, pauses to make sure that his followers understand what he wants them to do in response to the things he has just said and done.

Clearly his disciples still have some very mis-guided understandings about leadership and greatness. In response to that, and for other reasons I'm sure, Jesus models for them this act of humbling service that, on one level, points forward to what will be the ultimate demonstration of what leadership and greatness are about. Jesus, the Shepherd who loves his sheep, does what has to be done to deliver his sheep from their own sin and darkness and lead them home to safe pastures. At the same time, and at another level Jesus' model also serves as a clear *rebuke* of his disciples' pettiness and foolishness and, at still another level, takes away any excuses and - more positively - provides them with a practical example and motivation for serving one another in ways that mirror the self-sacrificial service of their Master.

And this last bit - this model and motivation for humble, sacrificial service - is the thing that Jesus wants his disciples to take home. Obviously they cannot - by the very nature of the case - imitate the greater service of the cross to which the foot-washing points. That is Jesus' work, and it is his work alone.

But what he does expect them to do is to, keeping his cross in view, imitate their Lord and Savior and *Hero* by being willing to humble themselves in serving one another. Because Jesus was not only about to leave, he was about to *leave them in charge*. It was to these men that he had entrusted the continuation of the Kingdom work that his arrival ushered in. And if they were going to have any hope of pulling that off, they were going to need a radical change of heart and perspective. Their current understanding of leadership - as revealed by their bickering - simply would not do. That was the way of the world. That was a view that saw leadership as a way to be served, as a means of self-promotion. That sort of leadership gloried in having people to order around, seeing them as mere pawns or tools to be used to satisfy the leader's wishes.

In the face of that, and in a way they would never forget, Jesus dresses himself like a servant and washes their feet, demonstrating how, in God's kingdom, everything gets turned on its head. Leadership, it turns out, is not a place of privilege at all. Rather, it is simply an opportunity to serve *in privileged ways* - in other words, in ways that not everyone else has a chance to serve. In God's economy, you don't lead from on high. *You lead from your knees*. There is no such thing as service that is beneath you. There is nothing that you cannot do because there is nothing your Lord did not do and would not do. *And what is true for those who lead is equally true for those who are led*.

Well, with our time almost gone, I want to close out our study by offering a couple of quick comments that, I believe, are worth considering as we think about how we might go about taking these words of Jesus and acting upon them ourselves.

Firstly, as we think about applying these words, we have to always keep the cross of Jesus Christ in mind - which reminds us of why we do and do NOT give ourselves in the service of others. We don't do it as an attempt to replace or enhance or repeat those things which Jesus has

uniquely and sufficiently done *already*. All of our “foot-washings”, so to speak, are a consequence of, and in honor of, and in the service of the greater washing that Christ accomplished on our behalf.

Secondly, as we go forward, we ought to pray that the same motivation of enduring love that drove our Savior forward should become more and more evident in our lives as well. In praying for this what we are asking is that love - which is the fruit of the Spirit - and apart from which we can do nothing - we are praying that God will make it the case, as he continually refines our wretched hearts, that all of our false motivations - pride, power, manipulation, self-glory, wanting the admiration of others - all of those false motivations we are asking God to make more and more absent as He replaces them with love, that comes from the Spirit’s indwelling.

Thirdly, we have to be careful not to limit the application of this text to *facile imitation*. In thinking about this, John Mitchell is helpful,

*Jesus has washed the feet of Peter who will deny Him, of Thomas who will doubt Him, and of Judas who will betray Him. He has more in mind here than an ordinance of foot washing. I have no argument against those who claim we should have literal foot washing services. If you feel you should do that, that’s between you and the Lord. I think, however, that the Lord has a far greater matter before us here. If one is convicted that this command should be taken literally, then he should literally apply the words of our Lord. Even so, this is not to be viewed as the limit to which these words should be taken. Jesus does not simply say that we should do WHAT He has done, but that we should do AS He has done. The washing of the disciples’ feet is an example to be followed, and not just as an act to imitate as a ritual.*

In other words, one might want to imitate this ritual - for symbolic reasons - and that is alright. But doing so doesn’t mean we can “wash our hands” of these verses and be done with them - as if we have fulfilled all that has been asked of us here. Instead, we have to be prepared to think, *principially*, about what is going on here and then look for ways and forms that this sort of service might take in our own day. Foot-washing was a very sensible, practical, useful thing to do back then. It isn’t today. At least not in our part of the world. As an alternative to this, one writer suggests the following “transferable” realities that can guide us in thinking about the practical application of this sort of thing in our own day. In thinking about this foot-washing this writer notes that,

- 1) It was real service - not merely symbolic - their feet were dirty and got cleaned.
- 2) It was menial, and distasteful service - that doesn’t mean that all such service *has* to be that way - but it *might* be
- 3) It was voluntary, motivated by love
- 4) It was something that certainly could have been done by someone else, could have been delegated.
- 5) It was gracious ministry to the un-deserving, as we’ve seen: those who would deny him (Peter), doubt him (Thomas) and betray him (Judas).
- 6) It met a need that no one else was willing to meet.

Those aren't the only things that one might consider, and I wouldn't elevate them to the level of Scripture. But I think they can prove to be helpful for us in considering how to apply these words.

Finally, we would be remiss to not heed the instruction and implied warning of verse 17, "If you *know* these things, blessed are you if you *do* them." That is a charge and a challenge for all of Christ's disciples to put these things into practice. The opportunities are all around us. It is not hard to see these things. We see them all the time- and look away. But what this passage is calling us to do is to stop looking the other way, stop waiting for someone else to respond, stop thinking that it is beneath us or not our duty, stop worrying about what others might think or how personally humiliating it might be if we were to actually take this seriously.

Jesus says, "blessed are you - not if you merely know these things - but blessed are you *if you do these things*"