

That You May Continue to Believe...



AN EXPOSITION OF THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Jesus Washes the Disciple's Feet John 13:1-38

We were standing around in tight circle with our heads all hanging down. Some of the men were smoking but nobody was saying anything. Oh, there was an occasional mumble but that was all there was and even that wasn't intended to stir conversation. Our circle was enshrouded in that uncomfortable silence that sometimes envelops an unbelieving family after the death of a loved one.

I had preached the funeral and I had hammered the importance of the gospel as hard as I knew how. But this family, mired for so long in the slough of abiding, despondent unbelief, did not know what to do next. They did not know whether to wail, to cuss, to start drinking or to crank up a good game of cards. They were, and I mean this respectfully, completely outside their element. My presence, and the presence of the gospel I had brought with me, made things all the more uncomfortable.

So, we just stood there in silence. It was probably no more that three or four minutes, but it seemed longer. It seemed like everything, voices included, were

going in slow motion and then it happened. One of the ladies in the family, one of the few Christians in the family, walked by with a covered dish for those in the house. She smiled and spoke and the men in the group where I was standing exchanged pleasantries. She was a beautiful woman. She was impeccably dressed. She was, I thought, a marvelous illustration of godly, feminine Christian modesty and when she stepped upon the porch the half-slip she had been wearing, which had apparently been dangling by little more than a thread gave way and fell like a stone to a little pile around her feet.

I don't know if it was because the lady was so beautiful or if it was because our little group was so dour but every man in the group had been watching the lady walk up the drive and up the step. To a man, they gasped and still they could not quit watching. The lady, who knew immediately what had happened, began to shake uncontrollably, not with shame or embarrassment (well, maybe a little embarrassment) but with laughter. She stepped out of the half-slip, reached down and picked it up, pulled it up to her bosom, turned to the men and said something like, **"I'll bet you boys aren't used to this level of entertainment at most funerals you attend, are you?"**

It was the perfect thing to say and our little group burst open like a torrent. We laughed for three or four minutes and when we finished laughing you would have thought we were old army buddies. We began to talk about our friendships and we talked about the lady that had died. We talked about the harshness of life and the joy of family and I even got the chance to talk about how life is sometimes like losing your slip in front of a bunch of grumpy old men. You either have the inner strength to get through or you don't and that perhaps that

inner strength is somehow connected to our relationship to God through Jesus Christ. It was a moment in which all of the things connected with being a part of humanity is about as good as it gets.

A few months later, I was at a family reunion and deeply engaged in conversation with a couple of my favorite cousins when we looked up and saw one of our favorite uncles stumbling toward one of the tables in our direction. It was apparent, from the look on his terrified face that he had no idea where he was. To make matters worse, he had wet his pants. Now the idea that this man, a man that was always so proud and dignified, was so completely undone and yet did not even know it completely sucked the life out of our conversation. We sat there for a few seconds before we got up to help him, not grossed out by what had happened, yet sternly aware of our humanity and the toll that the passing of time was taking. It was a moment in which all of the things connected with being a part of humanity is about as bad as it gets.

You see there are scenes in our lives that point out the reality of our humanity. Sometimes those scenes can be wonderful; sometimes they can be intensely painful. Sometimes, it is hard to tell the difference between the two. That is the way it is our passage this morning. What we are going to see this morning are three very painful scenes. I don't really know any other way to say it. Of course, the presence of the person of the Lord Jesus causes us to wade through them anyway and ultimately redeems their meaning. But still, they are painful both to read and to think through. The first scene, verses 1-17, contain the story of Jesus washing the feet of His disciples and it contains the story of Peter's objection.

^{ESV} **John 13:1**...Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

Jesus knew He was about to die.

That He was about to die is indicated by the phrase, **“that the time had come for Him to leave this world.”** He had already demonstrated His love for them on countless occasions. The text says that he now showed the fullest expression of His love. John uses the phrase **“to the end”** to say that. It is a wonderful phrase because it can indicate both time and extent. It can mean, He loved them to the last minute.” And it can mean, **“He loved them with His whole being.”** It is sort of like the modern expression, **“He loved them to the max”**¹. Now the question is, **“How did He do that?”** The answer starts in verse 2.

^{ESV} **John 13:2**...During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, ³ 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, ⁴ rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. ⁵ 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.

Verse two is, I think, terrifying. It says and it uses the perfect tense to say it that when the supper finally came along Satan had already put into the heart of Judas to betray Jesus. The perfect tense is significant because it indicates a completed action in the past that results in something happening in the present. That means that Satan had already caused Judas even before the supper to make up his mind about betraying Jesus. In the immediately preceding context the thing most likely to have caused his decision would have been the act by Mary in chapter twelve.

Verse 3 then turns to talk about Jesus himself. It says that Jesus knowing that God had put all things under His power and that He was from God and returning to God got up and took off His outer clothing. The phrase that is used means that He laid aside His outer garments to the extent that He retained only a loincloth. That means He would have assumed the dress and position of a slave². Now the interesting thing about the phrase "**he laid aside**"³ is that it is the same word that is used in John 10:17 when Jesus says....

^{ESV} **John 10:17**...For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father."

The phrase "**take it up again**" is also the phrase that is used a little later on here in this chapter when He puts back on His clothes. At any rate, Jesus laid aside His clothes, took upon Himself the role of a servant, wrapped a towel around His waist and began to wash the feet of His disciples.⁴ It is not clear whether Jesus started with Peter or ended with Peter⁵. But when Jesus got to him Peter objected.

^{ESV} **John 13:6**...He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" ⁷ Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." ⁸ Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me."

The discussion between Peter and Jesus is remarkably intense. The way Peter phrases his words is just about as emphatic as it can get. "**Lord, you think you are going to wash my feet!**" To which Jesus replied, "**You'll understand this later.**" Of course, He doesn't mean later on that night. He means later after the

resurrection⁶. But Peter won't have any part of it. His response is excruciating to read in Greek. It is something like this, **"There is no way this is going to happen. You absolutely will not wash my feet as long as heaven stands."** Literally, his phrase **"not even unto eternity."**

The problem for Peter was false humility. One of the things that I think is so interesting about reading a comparison of the gospel accounts is that the others gospels say that they were arguing about who was going to be the greatest in the kingdom of God.

^{ESV} **Luke 22:23**...And they began to question one another, which of them it could be who was going to do this. ²⁴ A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.

Perhaps Peter, wanting here to maintain his own exalted position, is insisting that Jesus maintain His exalted position. It is hard to imagine such open confrontation with Jesus. But Jesus looks him straight in the face and doesn't blink. When Peter realizes that Jesus is not going to be moved, he still tries to dictate to Jesus how to finish up.

^{ESV} **John 13:9**...Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you." ¹¹ For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean."

As I said earlier, it is an excruciating scene. It is one of those scenes where somebody says something stupid and then instead of drifting off into silence just keeps on going, unable to shut up, spiraling downward further and further until

they crash and burn up themselves and everyone around them. But even Peter's incessant rambling was worsened by Jesus' final few words, "**And you are clean, though not every one of you.**" They were horrific words and if I had been Simon Peter, I think I would have thought they were directed at me. He was the one who objected to being washed. He was the one that had faced the Lord in is such an openly stiff-necked fashion. I'm sure He was glad when the Jesus turned the topic elsewhere.

^{ESV} **John 13:12**...When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you?"

Of course, on one level they knew the answer. He had washed their feet. But it was more than that.

^{ESV} **John 13:13**...You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

The promise of blessedness at the end of verse 17 makes us want to look especially carefully at what Jesus did in washing the feet of His disciples. Now clearly it was an example. The same word is used several places in the New Testament including...

^{NIV} **Hebrews 4:11**...Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their **example** of disobedience.

^{NIV} **2 Peter 2:6**...if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an **example** of what is going to happen to the ungodly;

Now the question is, **“Was it only an example or was it more?”**

There are basically three views about what the foot washing meant. First, there are those that hold it was strictly an example, He did the act as a sign of selflessness to demonstrate how His disciples ought to treat each other. Now I don't think there is a one of here that will deny it is an example. In fact, it can't be denied. The text says that it is an example straight out. But the question is, **“Is that all it meant?”**

Secondly, there are those that hold that it was an example of the need for ongoing forgiveness and sanctification. Those that hold that view do so because of the phrase, **“if you have had a bath, you need only to have your feet washed.”** Here's what they mean. Those think that Jesus intended them to understand that it was necessary for Him to keep coming back and cleansing their new sin. They argue that what is going on here is something like in 1 John. That is, they are arguing that Jesus is saying this kind of washing is necessary to maintain fellowship with Him. It is true that we ought to keep our sins on a very short list and that we ought to continually confessing them in order to keep our fellowship with Him unclouded. On the other hand it is hard to see how the disciples can do that for each other.

Finally, there are those, and I am among them, that think this is an example or a picture of what it meant for Christ to be a servant. That is, the big picture is in

view here. I think that the illustration of Christ laying aside His garments and wrapping a towel around Him is a perfect picture of what happened in the incarnation. You see He laid aside His kingly robes when He took to Himself a human body. He took on the form of a servant when came to wash away our sins. After he finished accomplishing that He took back up His heavenly robe and remains there now in all His glory and splendor.

The vocabulary associated with the passage conveys this idea perfectly and it makes sense in light of the fact that Jesus told them they wouldn't understand what He had done until later.

That means that I think the washing is a symbol of His work of atonement for His people. I think the washing is a symbol of His washing our sins away. And it is only a symbol. It wasn't necessary for Him to bath them for the symbol to work. But it was necessary for them to see the symbol and it is certainly necessary for Him to wash away our sins for us to have a part in Him. That makes what he said to Peter make sense.⁷

At any rate, our relationships to each other are forever changed because of what He did. That's the point Jesus is making. Simplified, it is something like this, "Jesus, the Son of God, laid aside His kingly place and dominion and came into the world, taking upon Himself the role of a servant, in order to obtain for us the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Since He did that and since we are the very people for whom we did that, we too ought to lay aside our pride and our relentless, uncrucified lust to be the center of all things and love the brothers and

sisters. We ought to love them not because they are lovely but because He loves them.”

That’s the application. We ought to love each other and serve each other because He was willing to be the lowest kind of servant in securing our forgiveness. That means that I ought to love Howard not because Howard is lovely but because Jesus loves Howard. I ought to be willing to serve Him in the most demeaning way because Jesus did so. I ought to be willing to endure His idiosyncrasies not because they are pleasant but because Jesus blood covers Him over.

Now, let give just one other application. I can only apply this to myself. I cannot apply this to others. I cannot say, **“My bother why are you not loving me?”** Oh, I can say that but I ought not. I ought only apply this to myself. I ought to ask, **“How can I not love someone He loved?”** If I apply it to someone else, instead of myself, I wind up asking the same question Peter did, **“Lord are you going to wash my feet?”** You see the lesson of the servant is the lesson of death. That is, it is the death of ME.

Now, verses 18-30 contain the second painful scene in chapter 13. Here we will see the prophesied betrayal of a trusted friend. Of course, Jesus had hinted at the idea earlier in verse 10 when He had said that they were not all clean. Here is verse 18-20 He fleshes it out further.

^{ESV} **John 13:18...** I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, 'He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.' ¹⁹ I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he. ²⁰ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives

the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me."

Jesus reminds them again that one of them is not clean; He reminds them that one of them is a traitor. He even quotes Psalm 41 to get the point across.

^{NIV} **Psalm 41:9**...Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me.

Finally when Jesus gets to verse 21, He says what He has to say plainly.

^{ESV} **John 13:21**...After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." ²² The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. ²³ One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table close to Jesus, ²⁴ so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. ²⁵ So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, "Lord, who is it?" ²⁶ Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it." So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. ²⁷ Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." ²⁸ Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. ²⁹ Some thought that, because Judas had the moneybag, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the feast," or that he should give something to the poor. ³⁰ So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

Let me read you something D.A. Carson wrote.

Peter recovered first; but remembering how his last outburst earned him a rather sharp rebuke, he was loath to plunge ahead with the obvious question. He caught John's eye and mouthed the question now gathering in everyone's mind.

"Ask him which one he means," he mimed, nodding toward John who lay on the pallet next to Jesus.

John, leaning on his left arm, slowly twisted backward so that he could talk to Jesus. **John's head fell back on Jesus' breast; and then John asked quietly,** "Lord, who is it?"

Jesus answered, **"It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish."**

Everyone stared at Jesus. No one spoke. Slowly Jesus dipped His bread in the dish, shook off the excess, and held the bread out to Judas Iscariot.

Now everyone stared at Judas. It did not seem possible that he could be a traitor. Had he not been with them from the beginning, preaching and performing miracles with the best of them? Had he not been trusted and respected enough to serve as treasurer? It was hard to believe that Judas could become a turncoat. When would this happen? Or was Jesus simply offering a warning, and hoping that a dangerous tendency could be nipped in the bud by a slicing thrust, by public exposure?

Still Jesus held out the bread to Judas. Judas felt the stares. Shamed and sullen, he said nothing while his racing mind searched out what he should do next. He had already made arrangements to betray Jesus; and now he had to come to a final decision. He had found the foot-washing episode so humiliating, so unfitting for any would-be Messiah that he had found his decision to betray Jesus greatly reinforced. And now this! The temerity of this Jesus! But what was Jesus up to? Was he warning him? Or pleading with him to refuse to take the bread? Or calling his bluff? Or trying to shame him out of it? Just look at the stunned and stupid stares of these people—they can't seem to recognize that their vitality and independence are being emasculated by this Teacher who is curiously captivating yet too meek and too weak to provide the leadership the nation needs. Firmly, decisively, Judas reached out and took the dipped bread. The challenge was accepted, or the bluff called. Judas crossed some personal Rubicon, and when he did Satan took hold of him.⁸

Now let me ask you a question? Why do you think John make such a point of Judas betrayal? He's mentioned it three times already even before he gets to this event. It is, I think, because of how it ties it to the theme of John. Remember he is trying to sway those first century fence-straddlers who were waffling in their

commitment to Jesus. I think John is asking, **“You don’t want to be like Judas do you? You don’t want to get so consumed in your own selfish lusts that you forsake the sinless, selfless Son of God? No, of course, you don’t.”** Of course, the application is the same for us today. I have met and no doubt you have met those that have some great besetting sin or some great unconfessed lust that keep them from Jesus. Let us seek to not be like that. Let us seek to cleave to Him always and lay these other things aside. Let us become servants and reflect His servant hood that is His forgiveness, in our lives.

While I am here let me say a word about this last sentence, **“It was night.”** It is one of those cases of double entendre in John that makes John so wonderful. It was like back in chapter 10, when John had said, **“It was winter”** because of the cold reception Jesus received in the temple. Here it means that it is the height of blackness. It is the darkest of nights not because of actual light, for there would have been a full moon, but because of what Judas was about to do, because of what is about to happen to God’s precious lamb.⁹

There is one other aspect that I wish I had time to cover. IT concerns the removal of leaven from houses or places where the Passover is being observed. You could say Jesus wisely removes Judas Iscariot here because Judas is leaven in the house.

Now finally, we come to the third painful scene in John 13. Now the section is divided into two parts: (1) the repetition of the idea that Christ’s disciples ought to love one another. The command is a restatement of the idea that “we ought to wash each other’s feet.”

Secondly, it closes with a prophetic word concerning Peter's denial. Let me just read it.

^{ESV} **John 13:31**...When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. ³² If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.' ³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." ³⁶ Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered him, "Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward." ³⁷ Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." ³⁸ Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.

Now, we probably ought to go on to 14:1 for you to get the full import of this lesson but I am going to wait if you don't mind. Let's just leave Peter right there having already been admonished once and now having been told plainly that he too would deny Jesus. Let me instead, close with a little story, a story that will help us to get something of the import of today's lesson.

Shortly after Booker T. Washington took over the presidency of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, he was walking in an exclusive section of town when he was stopped by a wealthy white woman. Not knowing the famous Mr. Washington by sight, she asked if he would like to earn a few dollars by chopping wood for her. Because he had no pressing business at the moment, Professor Washington smiled, rolled up his sleeves, and proceeded to do the humble chore she had requested. When he was finished, he carried the logs into the house and stacked them by the fireplace. A little girl recognized him and later revealed his identity to the lady.

The next morning the embarrassed woman went to see Mr. Washington in his office at the Institute and apologized profusely. **"It's perfectly all right, Madam," he replied. "Occasionally I enjoy a little manual labor. Besides, it's always a delight to do something for a friend."** She shook his hand warmly and assured him that his meek and gracious attitude had endeared him and his work to her heart. Not long afterward she showed her admiration by persuading some wealthy acquaintances to join her in donating thousands of dollars to the Tuskegee Institute.¹⁰

Now that's a great story. I love it because it affirms that we ought not to act like we are more important than we are. Of course, there is one difference between this illustration and the text of John 13. Here a man is mistaken to be nobody when he really is something. In John we are deemed to be something when we really are nothing. We are nothing at all made something by the fact that God has washed our feet.

¹ W. Hall Harris, *Commentary on John*. (Available at the NetBible.com website.), 146. For the Evangelist, this has a double meaning: the obvious "utterly, completely," but also "to the very end of life itself," that is, up to the point of death. Note the phrase τετέλεσται ("it is ended") spoken by Jesus from the cross in 19:30.

² Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John (Rvd.)* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 547. Morris writes: Though the word is plural, τα ἱμάτια, it is possible that a single garment is meant. But it seems more likely that we should take the plural seriously. Elsewhere John uses the singular for one outer garment in 19:2, 5 and the plural for all the garments in 19:23, 24. If τὰ ἱμάτια here has the same meaning as in the latter passages, then Jesus stripped to a loin cloth, just like a slave. τι, qhsin, "puts aside," is the verb used of Jesus' laying down his life in 10:17-18.

³ Brown, 551. Brown writes: Literally "laid [down]"; this is the same verb (*tithenai*) used in x 11, 15, 17, 18 for the laying down of life. A deliberate parallel is not out of the question since the corresponding action of *taking up* (both the robe and life) is also expressed by one verb (*lambanein*) in xiii 12 and x 17, 18. All of this serves to relate the footwashing to the death of the Lord.

⁴ Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel V.2* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1942), 512. Hoskyns quotes Strack-Billerbeck with this interesting allusion. "The girding with the towel marks the action of a slave; compare the Midrash on Abraham's dismissal of Hagar (Gen. xxi. 14), 'Abraham dismissed her with a bill, of divorcement and took a cloth and girded it about her loins, that men might know her to be a slave' (Strack-Billerbeck). The Lord, having thus removed His clothes and assumed the vesture of a slave, undertakes the action of a slave."

⁵ Westcott, 190-1. Westcott thinks he started with Peter because it would have been strange for Peter to object after Jesus had already washed other disciples. But I think the opposite is true. Pride pushes men to try to distinguish themselves by there objections.

⁶ Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 459. Ridderbos writes: Jesus' reply (vs. 7) anticipates this, but in a hidden way that is characteristic for the historical situation. He neither explains nor justifies his conduct to Peter but, tying in with Peter's own "you...me" and on the basis of the difference between them, corrects Peter with "What *I* am doing *you* do not understand now." The idea that Jesus thus refers to the explanation he gives immediately after the footwashing (as though he said, "Have a moment's patience. I will explain it to you in a minute") is now almost universally rejected and seems contradicted by vs. 8. "Later" is to be understood rather as an allusion to the idea in texts like 12:16 (cf. 2:22), which refer to the time after Jesus' resurrection: then, by the light of Scripture and under the guidance of the Spirit, the light will dawn for the disciples in general and for Peter in a most personal way on what now appears perplexing and unacceptable.

⁷ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 467. Carson writes: "But the links that tie these verses to the theme of cleansing that dominates the preceding verses are more than accidental. Even when the footwashing is said to point, in various ways, to spiritual cleansing based on Christ's death, both the footwashing and that atoning death are the supreme displays of Jesus' love for his own (v. 1b). The footwashing was shocking to Jesus' disciples, but not half as shocking as the notion of a Messiah who would die the hideous and shameful death of crucifixion, the death of the damned. But the two events — the footwashing and the crucifixion — are truly of a piece: the revered and exalted Messiah assumes the role of the despised servant for the good of others. That, plus the notion of cleansing, explains why the footwashing can point so effectively to the cross."

⁸ D.A. Carson, *The Final Discourse and Final Prayer of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980), 13-14.

⁹ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 483. Footnote 3 is particularly telling. "Yet the Paschal moon was shining at the full. He John was thinking of the "dark night of the soul."

See also C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 402.

¹⁰ Taken from *Our Daily Bread*