

John 13:1-17

It is now the day before the crucifixion. Jesus is no longer walking among the hostile Jews. He has retired with His disciples for a final time of fellowship with them before going forth to His trial and crucifixion. The setting is the Upper Room, prepared for the Last Supper. The evening meal is the Passover meal.

What was Jesus thinking and planning in v. 1? He knew that the time had come for Him to die, to rise again, and to go back to heaven. His coming was an act of love for all mankind (3:16) but He had a special love for His sheep: He loved His own. He proceeded to show the disciples the full extent of His love.¹

What was Satan doing (v. 2)? He had already planted the thought of betrayal in Judas' mind. This was not the first time the thought had crossed Judas' mind. Judas had plotted this evil long before this but now he was given the signal for carrying out his plan. Jesus had actually prophesied this (6:70-71).

What did Jesus do next (vv. 4-5). Jesus got up from the meal, took off His outer clothing, took a towel and wrapped it around His waist and washed the disciples' feet drying them with the towel.

What do we know about the act of foot washing in Jesus' day? In eastern lands, everyone walked in open sandals in a dusty environment which made it necessary to wash one's feet frequently. Washing feet was a practical and cultural custom. It was common courtesy for a host to arrange to have a slave wash the feet of his guests—a sign of hospitality. Here the divine Host became the slave and performed this lowly service. There was no spiritual significance attached to the act itself. "Jesus at the feet of the traitor—what a picture!"²

By washing their feet, what messages did Jesus send to His disciples? It was a powerful visual lesson in servant leadership. It was a way that Jesus could demonstrate His unfathomable love for His disciples. But beyond that, it was a lesson which the disciples desperately needed to learn, a lesson in humility. In the kingdom of God, a position of leadership is simply another place of service.

Note: No matter where you find yourself on the leader-follower scale, the Christian is to serve God by serving others. Being a leader enables one to serve as others cannot. Position and privilege are not occasions for arrogance but are opportunities for service.

Why did Peter balk at the idea of Jesus washing his feet (vv. 6-9)? The sight of the Son of God in the role of a servant was shocking and disturbing to Peter. One so great should not condescend to one so unworthy. Peter was perhaps thinking, "I don't deserve to have my feet washed by you." That's exactly the point! None of us would ever deserve to have Jesus serve us. But think about the many ways that Jesus has served you throughout your life.

Peter could not refrain from objecting. But Jesus encouraged him to submit to having his feet washed with the promise that he would understand later why Jesus was washing them (cf. vv. 12-20). Just as the disciples did not understand that Jesus would die, they did not understand, either, the lessons that led up to His death. They would understand after He arose and the Holy Spirit enlightened their minds.³

We all can identify with Peter when he speaks before he thinks. But whatever Peter's faults, he deeply loved the Savior. If you look beyond his impulsiveness, you can see his total devotion. Jesus knows Peter's heart. Peter ends up as a member of the inner circle of three. The bottom line is that Jesus wants our hearts and can work with our unique personalities and imperfect performance.

When did Jesus mean by "later" (v. 7)? After Pentecost when the Holy Spirit would guide them into all truth.

What was Jesus' point (vv. 8-9)? Jesus was speaking of spiritual cleansing. Peter understood Him to be speaking on the physical level. Although Peter continued to miss the spiritual lesson, he was certain of his desire to be joined to Jesus. Therefore he asked Jesus to wash his hands and head as well as his feet.⁴

Jesus answered him, unless I wash you, you have no part with me; he does not say, unless I wash *your feet*, but rather unless I wash *you*.....meaning not with water, but with his blood. Christ used the word wash here, not literally, but in a spiritual and figurative sense. It is as if he should say, "Peter, unless I wash your sins away by My atoning death (cf. Revelation. 1:5) you have no real relationship to Me" (cf. 1 John 1:7).⁵

What did Jesus mean (v. 10)? A person who has had a bath (Peter) is clean, i.e. has been saved. But feet become dirty while walking through life refers to those sins which hinder the believer's fellowship with God (Psalm 66:18; Proverbs 1:28-29; Isaiah 59:2). Therefore, Jesus was illustrating the importance of believers obtaining spiritual cleansing from God—periodically—when He washed the disciples' feet. We obtain this cleansing by confessing our sins to God (1 John 1:9).

Who was not clean (v. 11)? Judas. **Why was he not clean?** He had rejected the life-giving, cleansing words of Jesus so he was still in his sins. He was spiritually “dirty,” i.e., not saved.

Why did Jesus wash Judas' feet knowing he would betray Him? Jesus loved Judas. This was an offer of initial spiritual cleansing for Judas. It was not too late to repent. Jesus' solemn announcement now forced Judas to act quickly or to repent. At this point Judas had a choice to make. It was not too late.

Does God expect us to conduct foot washing services today? Jesus was clearly teaching the principle of servanthood/servant leadership, rather than commanding the practice of foot washing. The washing of the disciples' feet was an example of servanthood to be followed—not just an act to imitate as a ritual (v. 15).

Jesus now returned to His role as the disciples' teacher. **What question did he ask His disciples (v. 12)?** *“Do you understand what I have done for you?”*

How did Jesus answer His own question (vv. 13-14)? He was saying, *“I, your teacher and Lord, have performed this lowly act of service for you. Have that same attitude of self-sacrifice among yourselves and go and serve others.”* Jesus had given the Twelve a lesson in humble service of one another in taking a lower role than theirs as an example to them.

What is the active verb in vv. 15, 17? Do. **What is the message to us?** Knowing what one ought to do, and actually doing it, are frequently two different things. The important thing is not merely knowing the truth, but doing it. If Jesus' disciples do what He has commanded, they will be blessed. In our relationship with God, He expects us to be active participants not passive spectators. *“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says”* (James 1:22).

Where do good works fit into the Christian's relationship with God? Doing good things/works are important to God. Works are evidence of a true faith. We cannot do works which are good (in God's eyes) unless we are first “in Christ,” i.e., saved. *“For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do”* (Ephesians 2:10).

What is the proper motivation for doing good works? Appreciation, love, and a desire to please God. Not to earn God's favor. As believers, we already have 100% of God's favor.

What point was Jesus making in v. 16? His point was that no disciple of His should think it beneath him or her to serve others since He, the master and sender, had humbled Himself to serve.⁶ By common consent, slaves occupy an inferior role to that of their masters, and messengers do the same to those who send them. Jesus was contrasting roles, not essential worth. Blessing comes through obedient service.

Just as He loved His disciples, He loves us because it is His nature. It is impossible for Him to not love us. What a comfort to the Christian, knowing that our Lord's love is constant and unchanging, knowing that He chose to love us—and to keep on loving us.....purely out of His grace.....not based upon our performance but on the basis of who He is and what He has done. What security! What grace! What a Savior!

¹ Edwin A. Blum, “John,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*: J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 319.

² William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments*, ed. Arthur Farstad (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 1542.

³ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, Notes on John, 2023 Edition (published by <http://planobiblechapel.org/soniclight/>), 353.

⁴ Edwin A. Blum, “John,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*: J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 320.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, Notes on John, 2023 Edition (published by <http://planobiblechapel.org/soniclight/>), 357.