

The Gospel of John, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 18: Washing the Disciples' Feet

John 13:1-38

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

John 13 opens the Upper Room and the final night before the cross, and it centers on two profound acts: the washing of the disciples' feet and the giving of the new commandment to love one another. Doctrinally, the foot washing reveals the self-giving love of Christ, redefines greatness and leadership in the kingdom as humble service, and teaches that we must receive Christ's cleansing before we can belong to Him ("if I do not wash you, you have no share with me"). The new commandment establishes sacrificial love for one another as the defining mark of Christ's disciples and His church. The heaviest doctrinal block belongs at Question 9, with significant weight at Questions 3 and 5.

At the same time, the chapter is intensely formational. It calls us to take the lower place, to let Christ serve us (which our pride resists), to wash one another's feet, and to love as He has loved. It even shows Christ serving His betrayer. The teacher should let the Lord with the towel confront the students' pride and self-sufficiency, and call them to a community marked by humble, sacrificial love.

So aim at both: a clear grasp of Christlike greatness, the necessity of receiving His cleansing, and love as the badge of discipleship, and a heart willing to receive His service, take up the towel, and love others as He loved us. The disciple we are forming kneels to serve and loves as Christ loves.

Question 1

Student Question:

John says that Jesus, knowing all that was about to happen, "loved his own who were in the world... to the end" (v. 1). What does it reveal about the love of Christ that He served and loved His disciples even on the night of His betrayal?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John frames the whole scene with a stunning statement: "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" (v. 1). On the night of His betrayal, facing the cross, Jesus' attention is on loving His own.

Draw out the timing of His love. Most people, facing such an hour, would be consumed with their own dread. Jesus, knowing the cross was hours away, turned outward in love. His love was

not diminished by His own suffering; it was poured out all the more. “To the end” means both to the last and to the uttermost.

Note who He loved: “his own,” including a betrayer and a denier. His love was not reserved for the deserving or the loyal. He loved disciples who would fail Him that very night. This is the character of Christ’s love, faithful, self-giving, and undeserved.

Apply it to the students’ security and example. The love that washed the disciples’ feet on the night of betrayal is the love that holds them. And it is the love they are called to imitate, a love that gives even when it is not returned, even when others fail us. Ask students how the steadfastness of Christ’s love, undimmed by His own suffering, strengthens and challenges them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The steadfast, self-giving love of Christ, poured out even facing the cross (John 13:1).
- Love that turns outward even in our own suffering.
- Christ’s love for the undeserving, including a betrayer.
- This love as both our security and our example.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it reveal that Jesus loved His own on the night of betrayal?
- How does the steadfastness of His love strengthen you?
- Where is Christ calling you to love even when it is not returned?

Question 2

Student Question:

The disciples had not stooped to wash one another’s feet, but Jesus did (vv. 4–5). Where is God calling you to take the lower place and serve in a way that your pride resists?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes up the contrast between the disciples and their Lord. They had walked dusty roads, and not one had volunteered to wash feet; they had even been arguing about who was greatest. Jesus, the Lord, took the towel and did the slave’s job (vv. 4–5).

Help students feel the pull of pride. Foot washing was beneath the disciples’ dignity. We, too, have tasks and roles we consider beneath us, the unglamorous service, the hidden help, the humble place. Pride keeps us from stooping, especially when no one would expect it of someone of our standing.

Draw out the call to the lower place. Jesus did not wait to be asked or to be appreciated; He simply took the role no one wanted. The Christian life regularly calls us to serve in ways our pride resists, to take the lower place, to do the menial thing, to serve without recognition.

Press for specifics. Ask each student where God is calling them to take the lower place and serve in a way their pride resists, a task, a person, a role they consider beneath them. The aim is not self-abasement but Christlike humility that is free to stoop. Encourage one concrete act of lowly service this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The call to take the lower place in humble service (John 13:4–5).
- Pride as the great obstacle to stooping to serve.
- Christlike humility that serves without being asked or appreciated.
- Service as freedom, not self-abasement.

Discussion Prompts

- Where is God calling you to take the lower place?
- What service does your pride resist?
- What is one concrete act of lowly service you could do this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus told Peter, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me” (v. 8). Why must we let Jesus serve and cleanse us before we can truly belong to Him, and what does this teach about the nature of grace?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Peter’s resistance draws out a crucial truth. He protests, “You shall never wash my feet,” and Jesus replies, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me” (v. 8). To refuse Christ’s service is to refuse Christ Himself.

Draw out the principle of grace. Peter’s refusal looks like humility but is actually a subtle pride, an unwillingness to receive, a desire not to be in the position of needing to be served and cleansed. But grace must be received. We cannot belong to Christ on the basis of our own cleanness or contribution; we must let Him wash us.

Connect the foot washing to the larger reality of cleansing. The washing points beyond physical feet to the cleansing from sin that only Christ can give. Just as Peter could not share with Christ unless Christ washed him, so no one can belong to Christ unless they receive His cleansing, the cleansing He provides through His sacrifice and applies to those who come to Him in faith and obedience.

Apply it to the nature of grace. The whole gospel is here in miniature: we contribute nothing to our cleansing; we receive it from Christ. Help students see that belonging to Christ begins not with what we do for Him but with letting Him do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Ask where they resist this, preferring to earn rather than receive.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Receiving Christ's cleansing as essential to belonging to Him (John 13:8).
- The subtle pride of refusing to be served and cleansed.
- Grace as something received, not earned or contributed to.
- The foot washing pointing to the cleansing from sin Christ provides.

Discussion Prompts

- Why must we let Jesus cleanse us before we can belong to Him?
- How can refusing to be served be a form of pride?
- What does this teach about the nature of grace?

Question 4

Student Question:

Peter first refused the washing, then wanted to be washed all over (vv. 8–9). Where do you swing between resisting God's grace and trying to over-perform for it, and what would it look like to simply receive what Christ gives?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes up Peter's swing from one extreme to the other. First he refuses entirely, "You shall never wash my feet"; then, told he must be washed, he overcorrects, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" (vv. 8–9). Peter struggles simply to receive what Christ gives.

Help students recognize the same swing in themselves. Many believers oscillate between resisting grace (trying to be good enough on their own, reluctant to admit need) and over-performing for it (anxious striving, trying to earn or secure what is already given). Both miss the simplicity of receiving.

Draw out Jesus' calm correction. Jesus tells Peter that the one who has bathed needs only to wash his feet; he is already clean (v. 10). Christ's grace is sufficient; Peter does not need to refuse it or to frantically add to it. He simply needs to receive what Christ offers.

Press for application. Ask each student where they swing between resisting God's grace and over-performing for it, and what it would look like to simply receive what Christ gives. The rest of grace is found not in earning and not in refusing, but in trusting the sufficiency of what Christ has done. Encourage one area where they will stop striving and simply receive.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The tendency to swing between resisting grace and over-performing for it.
- The sufficiency of Christ's cleansing (John 13:10).
- Rest found in receiving rather than earning or refusing.
- Trusting what Christ has done rather than adding to it.

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you swing between resisting grace and over-performing for it?
- What would it look like to simply receive what Christ gives?
- In what area do you need to stop striving and rest in His sufficiency?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus said, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (v. 14). What is Jesus teaching about greatness and leadership in His kingdom, and how does it overturn the world's model?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus draws the lesson explicitly: "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (v. 14). The One with the highest status took the lowest role, and He makes it the pattern for His followers.

Draw out the redefinition of greatness. In the world, greatness means being served, rising above others, accumulating status and power. In Christ's kingdom, greatness means serving, stooping, taking the lower place. The Lord and Teacher with the towel overturns the entire worldly hierarchy (compare Mark 10:42-45).

Apply it to leadership. Christian leadership, in the home, the church, and everywhere, is not lordship but service. Those who lead are called to serve those they lead, as Christ did. This guards against domineering, self-serving leadership and models the servant-heartedness of Jesus.

Apply it broadly. The towel is for everyone, not only leaders. Every disciple is called to wash one another's feet, to serve humbly and practically. Help students see service not as a step down but as the very shape of greatness in the kingdom. Ask how this redefinition challenges their assumptions about status and significance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Greatness in the kingdom defined as humble service (John 13:14; Mark 10:42-45).
- Christian leadership as service, not lordship.

- The overturning of the world's hierarchy of status and power.
- Service as the shape of greatness for every disciple.

Discussion Prompts

- What is Jesus teaching about greatness and leadership?
- How does this overturn the world's model?
- Where do you most need to redefine greatness as service?

Question 6

Student Question:

Jesus said, "I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you" (v. 15). Who are the people in your life whose "feet" Christ may be calling you to wash through humble service, and what holds you back?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes up Jesus' explicit command: "I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you" (v. 15). The foot washing is not merely to be admired but imitated.

Help students move from the general to the particular. It is easy to affirm service in principle; the question is whose feet, specifically, Christ is calling them to wash. Service becomes real when it has names and faces, the family member, the neighbor, the difficult coworker, the person who can do nothing for us in return.

Draw out the forms of foot washing today. Washing feet now looks like the humble, often unseen acts of service that meet real needs, helping, listening, giving, doing the menial task, caring for the overlooked. It is love expressed in deed, not just word (1 John 3:18).

Name what holds us back. Often it is pride (the task feels beneath us), busyness, self-interest, or fear of being taken advantage of. Ask each student to name one or two people whose feet Christ may be calling them to wash, and what holds them back. Then encourage one concrete act of foot washing this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The foot washing as an example to imitate, not merely admire (John 13:15).
- Service made real when it has specific names and faces.
- Love expressed in deed, not only word (1 John 3:18).
- Naming and overcoming what holds us back from serving.

Discussion Prompts

- Whose “feet” may Christ be calling you to wash?
- What does humble service look like for that person?
- What holds you back, and how will you overcome it?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus washed the feet of Judas, knowing Judas would betray Him (vv. 2, 11, 18–27). What does it teach us that Christ served and loved even the one who would betray Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

A sobering detail: Jesus washed the feet of Judas, knowing that Judas would betray Him that very night (vv. 2, 11, 18–27). The Lord knelt before His betrayer and washed his feet along with the rest.

Draw out the depth of Christ’s love. Jesus’ service was not reserved for the loyal and deserving. He served the one who was about to sell Him for thirty pieces of silver. This is love that extends even to the enemy, the betrayer, the one who will wound us. It is the love that would soon pray for His executioners.

Apply it to how we treat those who wrong us. Christ’s example confronts our instinct to withhold love and service from those who have hurt or will hurt us. He calls us to a love that does not depend on the other’s worthiness or loyalty, a love that can serve even a Judas (compare Matthew 5:44).

Be honest about the difficulty. This is among the hardest of Christ’s examples. Serving and loving those who betray or wound us is humanly impossible without His grace. Ask students whether there is a “Judas” in their life, someone who has wronged them, and what it would look like to extend even a measure of Christ’s serving love toward that person.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ serving and loving even His betrayer (John 13:2, 11).
- Love that does not depend on the other’s worthiness or loyalty.
- The call to love and serve even those who wrong us (Matthew 5:44).
- The need for Christ’s grace to love as He loved.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it teach that Christ served even Judas?
- Is there a “Judas” in your life you struggle to love?
- What would extending Christ’s serving love toward them look like?

Question 8

Student Question:

Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you” (v. 34). What is “new” about this commandment, and how is the love of Christ the measure and source of the love we are to have?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus gives “a new commandment”: “that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another” (v. 34). The command to love was not itself new (Leviticus 19:18), so what is new here?

Draw out what is new. The newness lies in the standard and the source: “just as I have loved you.” The measure of love is no longer merely “as yourself” but “as Christ has loved you,” a self-giving, sacrificial, to-the-end love that the disciples had just watched in the foot washing and would soon see at the cross. The new commandment sets the love of Christ as both the pattern and, through union with Him, the source of our love.

Stress the costliness implied. To love as Christ loved is to love sacrificially, to lay down our lives and our preferences for one another (1 John 3:16). This is far beyond mere niceness or sentiment. It is the love that stoops, serves, forgives, and gives, even when it costs and even when it is not returned.

Apply it to community. This love is specifically “one another,” the love of Christ’s people for each other. It is meant to characterize the church, binding believers together in Christlike, self-giving love. Ask students how the love of Christ both measures and enables their love for fellow believers, and where they most need to grow in loving as He loved.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The new commandment: love one another as Christ has loved us (John 13:34).
- The newness in the standard and source: Christ’s own love.
- Sacrificial love that lays down its life (1 John 3:16).
- Christlike love as the bond of the Christian community.

Discussion Prompts

- What is “new” about this commandment?
- How is the love of Christ both the measure and the source of our love?
- Where do you most need to grow in loving as Christ loved?

Question 9**Student Question:**

Jesus said, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (v. 35). Why does Jesus make sacrificial love for one another, rather than knowledge, power, or success, the defining mark of His disciples, and what does this say about the kind of community Christ’s church is meant to be?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, focusing on the defining mark Jesus gives His disciples: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (v. 35). Of all the things Jesus could have named, He chose sacrificial love for one another as the badge of discipleship.

Draw out the significance of the choice. Jesus did not say the world would know His disciples by their doctrine (vital as truth is), their knowledge, their power, their success, their buildings, or their cultural influence. He said they would be known by their love for one another. Love is the credential Jesus chose to give the watching world.

Explain why love is the mark. Love is the very character of God (1 John 4:8), the heart of Christ’s own example, and the clearest evidence that the gospel has truly changed people. A community of people who love one another as Christ loved them is a living demonstration of the gospel that no argument can match. The world is drawn to, and convicted by, genuine Christlike love.

Draw out what this says about the church. Christ’s church is meant to be a community defined by sacrificial love, not merely an organization, a meeting, or a set of correct positions. The local congregation should be a place where this love is tangibly practiced, in bearing one another’s burdens, forgiving, serving, and laying down our lives for each other. Where such love is absent, our witness is crippled, whatever else we get right.

Bring it to honest self-examination. Help students ask whether the watching world would identify them, and their congregation, as disciples of Jesus by their love. This is searching, because it is easy to prize correct belief or busy activity while neglecting love. Truth and love belong together; we are to hold the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Ask students where they need to grow in concrete, sacrificial love for fellow believers, so that the church becomes the community of love Jesus intends, and the world takes notice.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sacrificial love for one another as the defining mark of Christ’s disciples (John 13:35).
- Love, not knowledge or power or success, as the credential Jesus chose.
- Love as the character of God and the clearest evidence of the gospel (1 John 4:8).
- The church as a community defined by Christlike love.
- Truth and love held together (Ephesians 4:15).
- Genuine love as a witness no argument can match.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Jesus make love the defining mark of His disciples?
- What does this say about the kind of community the church is meant to be?
- Would the watching world identify you and your congregation by your love?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over this chapter, from the towel and basin to the new commandment. What is one specific way Jesus is forming you to receive His service, take up the towel, and love others as He has loved you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question gathers the chapter's threads: receiving Christ's service, taking up the towel, and loving as He loved. These three define the disciple this chapter forms.

Help students see the order and connection. First we receive Christ's service and cleansing (we let Him wash us); then, having received, we take up the towel to serve others; and the whole is animated by loving one another as He loved us. Receiving, serving, and loving form one seamless life.

Make it concrete. Ask each student to name one way they will let Christ serve them (receiving His grace rather than striving), one way they will take up the towel in humble service this week, and one relationship in which they will love as Christ has loved them.

Close with the Lord at their feet. The chapter began with Jesus kneeling before His disciples, and it calls us to both receive that love and extend it. Let students leave with the image of the Lord with the towel kneeling before them, having served them, and sending them out to serve and love one another, so that the world may know whose they are.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Receiving Christ's service, serving others, and loving as one seamless life.
- Grace received as the foundation for service given.
- Love as the animating power of Christian service.
- Concrete, specific formation as the goal of the lesson.

Discussion Prompts

- How will you let Christ serve and cleanse you this week?
- Where will you take up the towel in humble service?
- In what relationship will you love as Christ has loved you?