

The Gospel of John

Lesson 18: Washing the Disciples' Feet -- John 13:1-38

It is the last night. Jesus knows that "his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father," knows that one of the men at the table will betray Him, knows that another will deny Him before the rooster crows, knows that within hours He will be arrested, beaten, and crucified. And John tells us that, knowing all of this, "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." Then, in the upper room, the Lord of glory does the unthinkable. He rises from supper, lays aside His outer garments, wraps a towel around His waist like the lowest household slave, takes a basin of water, and begins to wash the dust and filth from the feet of His disciples.

Foot washing was the job no one wanted, reserved for the most menial servant in the house. The disciples had walked dusty roads in sandals, and not one of them had volunteered to do it; they had been arguing, even that night, about which of them was the greatest. And so Jesus does it Himself. He kneels before each of them, including the feet of Judas, who is about to sell Him, and washes them clean. Peter is scandalized: "Lord, do you wash my feet? You shall never wash my feet." And Jesus says the words that contain the whole gospel in miniature: "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." We cannot follow a Savior we will not let serve us.

When He has finished, He puts on His garments, returns to the table, and explains. "Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." He has given them a living parable of the entire Christian life. The greatness of the kingdom is not in being served but in serving. The one who stooped lowest is the Lord of all, and He calls everyone who would follow Him to take up the towel.

And then He gives them a new commandment, the badge by which the whole world will recognize His people: "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. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Not by their arguments, not by their power, not by their successes, but by their love. This chapter takes us into the heart of what it means to follow Jesus. Read it slowly, and let the Lord with the towel kneel down in front of you, and ask what He is calling you to take up.

Group Discussion: Jesus, the Lord and Teacher, took the role of the lowest servant and washed His disciples' feet (vv. 4-5, 14). Why is humble service so countercultural, both in the world and sometimes in the church, and what would it look like for us to genuinely "wash one another's feet"?

Personal Reflection: Peter resisted being washed, but Jesus said, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me” (v. 8). Where do you find it hard to let Jesus serve you, to receive His cleansing and grace rather than trying to earn your standing, and why?

Read John 13:1–38

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Philippians 2:3–8, Christ taking the form of a servant and humbling Himself; Mark 10:42–45, the Son of Man coming not to be served but to serve; 1 John 3:16–18, laying down our lives and loving in deed and truth; Galatians 5:13, through love serving one another; 1 John 4:9–11, loving one another because God so loved us.