

The Life of Christ, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 11: The Triumphal Entry and the Upper Room

John 13:1-17

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson moves into the upper room on the night of Jesus' betrayal, where, having entered Jerusalem days before to shouts of Hosanna, the King now kneels to wash His disciples' feet. The doctrinal heart of the passage joins two themes. The first is the humble servanthood of the divine Son. John is careful to frame the foot washing with statements of Jesus' majesty: His hour has come, the Father has given all things into His hands, He has come from God and is going to God. It is precisely in the full consciousness of His deity and authority that Jesus takes the towel. This is the same self-humbling Paul describes in Philippians 2: the One who was in the form of God taking the form of a servant. Help the class see that Christ's service is not a denial of His glory but its truest expression.

The second doctrinal thread is the necessity of the cleansing that Christ alone provides, which comes to a head at Question 9. When Peter refuses, Jesus says, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." The foot washing points beyond clean feet to a deeper cleansing from sin that only Christ can give, and it is grounded not in our efforts but in His atoning death. The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7). Take care to present the foot washing as far more than a moral example; it flows from and points toward the cross, where the Servant gives His life as a ransom (Mark 10:45). At the same time, Jesus explicitly gives it as an example to imitate, calling His followers to wash one another's feet, that is, to humble, mutual service.

Formationally, this passage is searching. It confronts our pursuit of status with the kneeling King, our pride with the necessity of being washed, and our reluctance to serve with the towel Christ places in our hands. It also grounds our service in His love that loved to the end and in the cleansing He has already given us. Press the class toward the blessing Jesus promises: not to those who merely know these things, but to those who do them.

Question 1

Student Question:

John writes that Jesus, knowing His hour had come, "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (v. 1). What does this reveal about the depth and steadfastness of Christ's love, especially as He faced the cross?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Set the verse in its solemn context. John frames the entire upper room scene with this statement of love. Jesus knows His hour has come, the hour of His suffering and death, and it is

in the shadow of the cross that His love shines most clearly. He is not distracted by His own coming agony; His attention is on His own.

Unfold the phrase “to the end.” The expression carries the sense both of duration, to the very last, and of completeness, to the uttermost. His love did not falter as the darkness gathered; it went all the way, to the cross and beyond. This is love that does not quit when it becomes costly, love proven precisely where it is most tested.

Note who the objects of this love are. He loved “his own,” the very men who would soon argue about who was greatest, fall asleep in His hour of need, scatter when He was arrested, and, in Peter’s case, deny Him. He loved them to the end knowing all of this. His love rested not on their worthiness but on His own steadfast heart.

Bring it to assurance. The love displayed in the upper room and on the cross is the same love Christ has for His people now. It is steadfast, complete, and unshaken by our failures. Let the class rest for a moment in the wonder of being loved to the end, before the lesson asks them to serve as those who are so loved.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The steadfast, complete love of Christ, loving to the very end
- Christ’s love shining most clearly in the shadow of the cross
- Love resting on His own heart, not on the worthiness of His own
- The assurance of being loved to the end despite our failures

Discussion Prompts

- What does the phrase “to the end” reveal about Christ’s love?
- Why is it significant that He loved them while knowing their coming failures?
- How does this love give assurance to His people today?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jesus loved His disciples to the end, even knowing their coming failures, including Peter’s denial and Judas’ betrayal. Where do you find it hard to believe that Christ loves you steadfastly, and how would truly resting in that love change you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question presses the steadfast love of Christ into the heart. Many believers struggle to believe that Christ truly loves them, especially in light of their failures. They imagine His love as fragile, easily forfeited, conditional on their performance.

Help the class see how the passage answers that fear. Jesus loved His own to the end while fully knowing their weakness, their pride, even their betrayal and denial. His love was not naïve about their failures; it embraced them with eyes open. This is the kind of love He has for us: not a love that has yet to discover our flaws, but a love that knows them fully and loves still.

Show how resting in this love changes us. People who doubt God's love tend either to despair or to strive anxiously to earn what they fear they do not have. Those who rest in being loved to the end are freed: freed from the treadmill of earning, freed to confess sin honestly, and freed to love and serve others out of fullness rather than fear. Invite each person to name where they doubt Christ's steadfast love and to consider how resting in it would change them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The struggle to believe Christ loves us steadfastly despite failure
- Christ's love embracing us with full knowledge of our flaws
- The despair and anxious striving that flow from doubting His love
- Freedom to confess, rest, and serve that flows from secure love

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you find it hard to believe Christ loves you steadfastly?
- How does His loving the disciples despite their failures speak to that doubt?
- How would resting in His steadfast love change the way you live and serve?

Question 3

Student Question:

In verse 3, John notes that Jesus knew the Father had given all things into His hands and that He had come from God, and it was precisely then that He rose to wash feet. What does it reveal about Jesus that He expressed His divine authority not by being served but by stooping to serve?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Draw attention to John's deliberate framing. Right before the foot washing, John records Jesus' full awareness of His own majesty: the Father had given all things into His hands; He had come from God and was going to God. John wants us to know that the One taking the towel is the One with all authority. The humility is the humility of God Himself.

Highlight the stunning reversal. We might expect that someone conscious of such authority would demand to be served. Instead, it is precisely out of that secure knowledge of who He is that Jesus stoops to the lowest task. He does not serve because He is unsure of His status; He serves because His greatness is the greatness of self-giving love. True divine glory expresses itself not in being served but in serving.

Connect this to Philippians 2. Paul says that Christ, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant. The foot washing is that hymn in action. The kneeling of Jesus reveals the very heart of God, who is not a tyrant to be appeased but a servant who stoops to save.

Apply it to our understanding of greatness. If this is what God is like, then the world's definition of greatness is exposed as false. Greatness in the kingdom looks like a basin and a towel. This prepares the personal question that follows about our own pursuit of status.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The humility of Christ as the humility of God Himself
- Divine authority expressed in service rather than in being served
- Christ's self-emptying servanthood (Philippians 2:5–8)
- The redefinition of greatness as self-giving service

Discussion Prompts

- Why does John stress Jesus' authority just before the foot washing?
- What does it reveal that Jesus served precisely out of secure knowledge of who He was?
- How does the kneeling of Jesus redefine greatness?

Question 4

Student Question:

The world measures greatness by status, power, and being served. Where are you tempted to grasp for recognition or to avoid lowly, hidden service, and whose feet, figuratively, are you most reluctant to wash?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question turns the kneeling King into a mirror. The world trains us to climb, to seek recognition, to be served rather than to serve. Even within the church, we can crave visible, honored roles while avoiding the lowly, hidden tasks that no one notices.

Help the class locate their own tendency. For some it is a hunger for recognition and credit; for others, an aversion to menial or unglamorous service; for others, a reluctance to serve particular people. Jesus washed the feet of all His disciples, including Judas. Ask each person to consider whose feet, figuratively, they are most reluctant to wash, the difficult person, the ungrateful one, the one they feel is beneath them or has wronged them.

Point to the example of Christ as both rebuke and grace. His kneeling exposes our pride, but it also empowers us. We do not serve in order to become great; we serve because the truly great One has served us and now hands us the towel. Invite each person to name one area where

they grasp for status or avoid lowly service, and to bring it honestly to the Christ who knelt before them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The world's measure of greatness versus the kingdom's
- Craving recognition and avoiding hidden, lowly service
- Reluctance to serve particular, difficult people
- Serving from Christ's example rather than to gain greatness

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to grasp for recognition or status?
- What lowly, hidden service do you tend to avoid?
- Whose feet, figuratively, are you most reluctant to wash, and why?

Question 5

Student Question:

When Peter protested, Jesus said, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me" (v. 8). What does this teach about the necessity of the cleansing that Christ alone provides, and how does the foot washing point beyond itself to a deeper washing?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice that Jesus raises the stakes far above clean feet. To Peter's refusal He responds, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." Suddenly this is about more than hygiene; it is about belonging to Christ at all. The foot washing has become a sign of a deeper, necessary cleansing.

Explain the deeper washing. Beneath the picture of washing feet lies the reality of cleansing from sin, which Christ alone can give and which He was about to secure at the cross. No one can have a share with Christ who has not been cleansed by Him. We cannot wash ourselves; we must be washed by Him. This is the heart of the gospel: our cleansing comes from Christ, not from our own efforts.

Draw out the necessity. Jesus does not present His cleansing as optional. To refuse it, as Peter momentarily did, is to refuse fellowship with Christ. Salvation is not a matter of cleaning ourselves up enough to be acceptable; it is a matter of receiving the cleansing that only He provides. We will develop the grounding of this cleansing in His atoning death at Question 9.

Apply it to humility and faith. To be cleansed by Christ, we must first admit that we need cleansing and cannot supply it ourselves. This is humbling, as Peter found. The next question presses this pride that resists being served and washed. For now, let the class see that the cleansing of Christ is both necessary and gracious: we cannot do without it, and we cannot earn it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The necessity of the cleansing Christ alone provides
- The foot washing as a sign of deeper cleansing from sin
- Our inability to cleanse ourselves; cleansing comes from Christ
- Refusing Christ's cleansing as refusing fellowship with Him

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Jesus raise the stakes from clean feet to having a share with Him?
- What deeper cleansing does the foot washing point to?
- Why is it humbling to admit we cannot cleanse ourselves?

Question 6

Student Question:

Peter first refused to let Jesus wash him, recoiling from being served. Where does pride make it hard for you to receive grace, to admit your need, and to let Christ cleanse and serve you rather than earning your own way?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Examine Peter's pride sympathetically, because it is our pride too. Peter's refusal sounds like humility, even reverence: surely the Lord should not stoop to wash his feet. But underneath is a pride that cannot bear to be served, that wants to relate to Christ as a giver rather than a needy receiver.

Show how this pride resists grace. Many of us find it easier to serve than to be served, easier to give than to receive, easier to work for our standing than to admit we cannot earn it. This instinct, though it can wear the mask of humility, actually resists the gospel, which requires us to come empty-handed and let Christ do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Call the class to humble receiving. True humility is willing to kneel and be washed, to admit need, to receive grace as a gift. Peter learned to say, in effect, "Then, Lord, wash all of me." Invite each person to name where pride makes it hard for them to receive grace and to admit their need, and to come to Christ as one willing to be served and cleansed by Him. We must be washed before we can wash others.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Pride that finds it easier to serve than to be served
- Resisting grace by insisting on earning our own standing
- True humility as willingness to receive and admit need
- Being washed by Christ before we can serve others

Discussion Prompts

- Do you find it harder to serve or to be served? Why?
- Where does pride make it hard for you to receive grace and admit need?
- What would it look like to let Christ fully cleanse and serve you?

Question 7

Student Question:

After washing their feet, Jesus said, "I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you" (vv. 14–15). What does Jesus call His followers to do, and what does humble, mutual service look like in the life of His church?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

State plainly what Jesus commands. Having washed their feet, He tells them they ought to wash one another's feet, and that He has given them an example to follow. The kneeling was not only something to admire but something to imitate. Christ's followers are to serve one another humbly, as He served them.

Draw out the meaning of the example. Whether or not we reenact foot washing literally, the point is unmistakable: those who follow the kneeling King are to take up the towel toward one another. No service is beneath the disciple if it was not beneath the Lord. In the church, this looks like meeting one another's real needs, especially the lowly and unseen ones, without regard for status or recognition.

Show how this shapes the community. A church marked by mutual, humble service is a community where the strong serve the weak, where no task is too low, where members outdo one another in honor rather than competing for it. This is the opposite of the world's ladder-climbing, and it is meant to be a visible sign of the love of Christ among His people.

Move toward the personal. The example is given to be done, not merely known, as the final verse will stress. This sets up the personal question that follows about the humble service we tend to avoid. Help the class see service not as an occasional heroic act but as a daily posture of love toward one another.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ's explicit call to imitate His servanthood (vv. 14–15)
- Humble, mutual service as the pattern for the church
- No service beneath the disciple that was not beneath the Lord
- A serving community as a visible sign of Christ's love

Discussion Prompts

- What exactly does Jesus call His followers to do?
- What does humble, mutual service look like in the church?
- How does such service contrast with the world's pursuit of status?

Question 8

Student Question:

Consider your own willingness to serve in lowly, unnoticed ways. What is one humble act of service you tend to avoid or feel is beneath you, and how does the example of Christ confront that reluctance?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question makes the call to service concrete. It is easy to affirm humble service in principle and avoid it in practice. The aim is to identify one specific act of lowly, unnoticed service that the student tends to avoid.

Help the class think practically. Lowly service might mean the unseen tasks in the home, the church, or the workplace, cleaning up after others, caring for someone who cannot repay, doing the job no one wants, quietly meeting a need that will never be noticed or thanked. We often avoid such things because they offer no recognition or because we feel they are beneath us.

Let the example of Christ confront the reluctance. The Lord of glory knelt on the floor and washed dirty feet, including the feet of the man who would betray Him. In light of that, no honest disciple can call any service beneath them. Invite each person to name one humble act of service they have been avoiding and to commit to doing it this week, not for recognition, but in imitation of the One who served them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Affirming humble service in principle while avoiding it in practice
- Identifying specific lowly, unnoticed acts of service
- Avoiding service that offers no recognition
- The example of Christ removing every excuse that a task is beneath us

Discussion Prompts

- What humble act of service do you tend to avoid or feel is beneath you?
- Why do you avoid it, and what does that reveal?
- How does Christ's example confront that reluctance?

Question 9

Student Question:

The humble service of Jesus in the upper room flows from, and points toward, the cross He was about to bear, where He would cleanse His people at the cost of His own blood (compare Philippians 2:5–8; Mark 10:45; 1 John 1:7). How does the foot washing reveal that Christ's servanthood is far more than a moral example, and how is the cleansing He offers grounded in His atoning death rather than in our own efforts?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it guards against a common reduction of the passage. Many treat the foot washing merely as a lesson in humility, a moral example to imitate. It is that, but it is far more, and to stop at the moral lesson is to miss the gospel in it. Begin by setting the foot washing in the shadow of the cross, just hours away.

Show the connection between the basin and the cross. When Jesus says, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me," He points beyond clean feet to the cleansing from sin that He was about to accomplish by His death. The kneeling Servant with the towel is on His way to becoming the crucified Savior with the crown of thorns. His service in the upper room is of one piece with His self-giving on the cross. Both flow from the same heart that loved His own to the end.

Ground the cleansing in His atoning death, not our effort. This is essential. The cleansing Christ offers is not something we achieve by trying harder to be humble or by imitating His example well enough. It is secured by His blood. Mark records that He came to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45); John writes that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7). We are cleansed by what He did, not by what we do. Our service, including washing one another's feet, is the grateful response of those already cleansed, never the means of earning that cleansing.

Hold the two together for the class. The foot washing is both gospel and example, and in the right order: first Christ serves and cleanses us by His death, and then, as those who have been washed, we take up the towel toward one another. To make it only an example is to turn the gospel into mere moralism; to ignore the example is to receive grace without letting it bear fruit. Christ's servanthood reveals the heart of God who saves us, and it sets the pattern for the saved. The cross is the source; our service is the stream.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The foot washing as gospel, not merely a moral example
- The basin pointing to the cross where Christ cleanses by His blood
- Cleansing grounded in Christ's atoning death (Mark 10:45; 1 John 1:7)
- Our service as grateful response, not the means of earning cleansing
- The right order: first cleansed by Christ, then serving one another
- Christ's servanthood revealing the heart of the God who saves

Discussion Prompts

- How does the foot washing point beyond a lesson in humility to the cross?
- Why is it important that our cleansing rests on Christ's death, not our efforts?
- How do gospel and example fit together here, and in what order?

Question 10

Student Question:

Jesus said, "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them" (v. 17). Looking back over the love that serves to the end and the cleansing Christ alone provides, name one specific act of humble, Christlike love you will carry out this week as one who has been washed by Him.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone rests on Jesus' own closing words: the blessing is not for those who merely know these things but for those who do them. Resist letting the lesson end in admiration of Christ's humility without imitation of it. Help the class name a specific, doable act of service.

Hold together grace and response, as the whole lesson has. The service we offer flows from the cleansing we have received. We do not serve to earn Christ's favor but as those already washed by Him, the grateful overflow of grace. Encourage each person to serve this week as one who has been served by the kneeling King.

Invite concreteness. Ask for one specific act of humble, Christlike love, aimed if possible at the very person or task they named as most reluctant earlier in the lesson. The point is to take up the towel in some real way before the week is out. Close by reminding the class of the promise: blessed are you if you do them. The path to that blessing runs through the basin and the towel, in the steps of the One who loved His own to the end.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The blessing promised to doers, not merely hearers (v. 17)
- Service flowing from cleansing already received
- A specific, concrete act of humble service
- Taking up the towel in imitation of the kneeling King

Discussion Prompts

- What specific act of humble, Christlike love will you carry out this week?
- How does remembering that you have been washed by Christ shape that service?
- Whom will you serve, and how will you guard against serving for recognition?