

Listen: What did Jesus Say?

Washing Feet

John 13:1-20

Mark Vroegop

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. 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. 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." 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." 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? 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. 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" (John 13:1–20 ESV).

In life, particular moments have significance beyond themselves. These memorable events become emblematic of something more.

The World Series tends to bring out these unforgettable moments.

This year's World Series featured memorable moments, as the Washington Nationals took home their first pennant. But the series may well be remembered as the moment when Jeff Adams refused to put down his beer as he "body blocked" a home run in game five.

On a more serious note, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, game three of World Series was played at Yankee Stadium. It was barely a month after the attacks, and President George W. Bush took the mound with a bulletproof vest under his jacket, delivering a perfect strike. It was a good pitch, but it was something more.

Cultural and historical moments have a memorable narrative to them. They become emblematic.

The Bible has memorable moments that are emblematic as well. The Gospel of John is full of them: turning water to wine, the woman at the well, the resurrection of Lazarus, and the anointing of Jesus. Each of these events points to something we need to learn about Jesus. They help us know what he is like.

But if you were to line up the most memorable moments that combine what he is like and what his follower are to be like, John 13 is at the top of the list. If you were to say, “Show me a clip where Jesus shows disciples how to live,” this text would be the scene.

It’s the moment in the upper room, the week before Jesus’s death, where he washes the disciples’ feet. There are rich lessons to be learned here. And I want to summarize the truth of the text with a simple statement: “Watch Jesus. Go low.”¹

This passage is a signature moment in Jesus’s life and ministry. But it’s also a critical instructional moment for every disciple. Let’s unpack what we see here.

Watch Jesus

The focus of the Gospel of John shifts. Chapters 13-17 record some of the most important instructions that Jesus gives to his disciples.

John sets this section up with an important introduction in verse one. We learn the following:

- The final week of Jesus’s life has begun. It’s Passover week.
- Jesus’s earthly ministry is coming to an end. The cross is fast approaching.
- Love is the primary characteristic of Jesus’s ministry.

John wants to highlight the love of Jesus—both for you (as the reader) to see it in Jesus but also so that you will do something with it. Don’t miss the weight of the words: “he loved them to end” (v. 1). John wants you to see the divinely inspired demonstration of love.

This is a banner that is hoisted over the remaining week of Jesus’s life. Everything he does will be motivated by this love. Remember, John knows the rest of the story. He knows how the disciples fled.

¹ I’m thankful for this distillation from John Piper’s sermon on John 13:1-20 - <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/for-his-sake-and-for-your-joy-go-low>

He knows Peter's denial. John knows the lonely road Jesus will walk. And he wants you to see everything Jesus does through the lens of his love. Watch his love!

Charles Spurgeon, a nineteenth-century pastor in London, said this:

He will love his people to the utmost end of their unloveliness. Their sinfulness cannot travel so far but what his love will travel beyond it; their unbelief even shall not be extended to so great a length but what his faithfulness shall still be wider and broader than their unfaithfulness...If our sins be mountains, his love shall be like Noah's flood...²

However, John loves contrasts. Light and darkness. Hidden and revealed. Rejected and received. And in verse two, John identifies that the plot to kill Jesus is already in motion. Judas had already determined to betray Jesus. But John says it this way: "...when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas... to betray him."

I don't think you should take this as if Judas was merely a passive player. Yet, it's not as though he intentionally invited demonic possession. Rather, John is saying that Judas's plans fit into the plans of Satan. Judas's desires lined up with Satan's desires.

We don't have time to fully explore this, but I want to caution you not to relegate Judas's sin into a distant and unimaginable category. Judas is participating in a satanic conspiracy, but I don't think he knows it. We know that he's greedy. It's likely that he became a disciple because of what he thought Jesus would do for him. And when that disappointment took hold, Judas was willing to betray Jesus.

Having been in pastoral ministry for a while, I've seen the devil use people in terrible ways. But do you know what is also true? Those people didn't know they were instruments of Satan. They just wanted what they wanted regardless of the cost.

But this also should be an encouragement because even Jesus had an evil person in his midst. Sometimes we might be tempted to think that godly leaders or faithful parents never have wayward disciples, kids, or leaders. But that's just not the case. In the ranks of Jesus's closest disciples is a betrayer—a man who will be used by Satan. Perfect leaders, pastors, and parents do not prevent Judases.

There's one more contextual matter that John addresses. He wants you to feel what is about to happen. John reiterates the nature of Jesus's ministry: "...knowing the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God rose from supper" (v. 3-4). Jesus is supreme. He's on a mission from God. He's going back to God. He's the Son of God.

And what does this supreme Son of God who is living on the mission of his father do? He rises from supper and proceeds to wash the disciples' feet.

² https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/spurgeon_charles/sermons/0810.cfm

John creates a particular image in verses 4-6: Jesus laid aside his outer garments. He tied a towel around his waist. Poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet. With John's previous introduction and the flourish about his power, you might expect Jesus to give a powerful address. Maybe announce his plans. Declare himself victorious over Satan. Reveal his supernatural glory. Or even confront Judas.

But Jesus does something completely contrary to human nature and the culture of the day. As they are reclining on small mats, seated around a low table, Jesus proceeds to wash the feet of every disciple. Imagine the sound of the trickling water. Feel the awkwardness as the meal stops for Jesus to take upon himself this lowly task. Here is Jesus, dressed like a menial servant and performing one of the most humbling acts of service to another.

We see at this moment what Paul said in Philippians 2:6-7, "who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

It's also important for you to remember that previously, the disciples had argued about who was the greatest, Jesus had just entered Jerusalem with cries of Hosanna, and they must have thought that this meal was the beginning of Jesus's quest for victory.

When Jesus comes to Peter, there's an objection. Peter is shocked. And he protests in light of his understanding about the Messiah: "You will never wash my feet" (v. 8). Jesus gently rebukes him by saying that if Peter refuses Jesus's act, he really doesn't understand who Jesus is. But then Peter exclaims, "...also my hands and my head." Again, Jesus gently rebukes him in verse 10. Peter over-spiritualizes the moment. Peter belongs to Jesus, but this act of humble love is what makes Jesus so unique.

But then Jesus makes a stunning statement: "You are clean, but not every one of you" (v. 11).

Consider the layers here as we watch Jesus:

- Here is the Son of God, who knows what is before him. He takes the form of a servant, washes the feet of his disciples, and loves them to the very end.
- Here is Jesus, who loves Peter in the midst of his brash, impetuous, and overreacting nature. He patiently and lovingly rebukes him and washes his feet.
- Here is Judas, who knows what he is going to do. Jesus knows what Judas is going to do. And yet Jesus still washes the feet of his betrayer.

Before we go any further in this text, just linger on the image of the Creator of the universe, the only begotten Son of God washing the feet of these twelve men. And then, hear Paul's words:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves" (Phil. 2:1-3).

Go Low

Jesus intended for his actions to become a teaching moment for the disciples. After Jesus clothed himself again, he asked them a direct question (v. 12): “Do you understand what I have done to you?” And what follows is a series of exhortations as Jesus presses them to follow his example. He’s attempting to redefine their understanding of his mission.

1. Humility is expressed with one another

Jesus appeals to what they believe about him. They’ve just watched Jesus, their teacher and Lord, take the position of a servant and humbly wash their feet. And if he has been willing to do this, so should they. The purpose of the foot-washing was to give them something to follow. The Greek word suggests both an example and a pattern.³ They were to take what they saw and repeat it.

But he particularly applies it to the way they are to treat one another. Jesus’s disciples had different personalities, different backgrounds, different education, different occupations, different political ideologies, and different gifts. Humility in that context would be essential.

In contrast to human nature and the culture in the world, Christians are called to live out their allegiance to Christ by acts of humility. Pride, self-exaltation, and posturing with others is part of the air that we breathe. Most human conflicts have this issue at the core. Jesus creates a counter-cultural community that is rooted in the gospel and his example. Watch Jesus. Go low.

2. Humility requires action

In verse 16, Jesus reminds them that they are not greater than him. If he acted in this manner, they should as well. And in verse 17, Jesus reminds them that it is not enough to know these things, they must do them.

Knowing that humility is important is one thing. Acting in a humble manner is another. They are not just to have humble hearts and think humble thoughts. They are to act in humble ways, especially as it relates to how they treat one another.

3. Humility takes the long view

Humility cannot be a short-term strategy where you look for quick results. Jesus acknowledged that there was someone in his midst who would betray him. In verses 18-19, he tells the disciples this so that they can put it all together in the future. Because at first, it would seem that Judas abuses the humility of Jesus. Judas could have been called out. He could have been taken out by Jesus.

³ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 468.

But Jesus is more interested in the fulfillment of the Scriptures. On Good Friday, the disciples will surely think that Jesus lost. But they will see his humility differently when the resurrection comes.

4. Humility is part of our commission

Verse 20 is one of the commissioning texts in the New Testament. It's a moment when Jesus attempts to help his disciples realize that they are to extend his ministry through their lives. They are to be ambassadors for Christ. They are called to represent Christ to the world. By their attitudes, words, and actions, the disciples of Jesus are to show the world what Jesus is like.

So, we are not merely called to embrace humility because it is right but also because it is central to the mission of Christ. This is not merely a suggestion; it is our calling as we follow Jesus.

Disciples of Jesus put away pride. They watch Jesus. And they go low.

Now What?

This is an incredibly important passage because it speaks to both the heart of Christianity and it contrasts with the way of the world. To live this way is both supernatural and rare. So, where do we start?

Believe the Gospel

We have to start with a right understanding of the core message of the Bible. We must realize that our sins separated us from God; that Jesus paid our debt, loved us first, and forgave us while we were still sinners. We have to look at our lives and remember that everything we have, we received (1 Cor. 4:7). We have to look to Jesus because if that isn't your first step, then nothing else makes sense.

Rehearse the Gospel

Even after we come to faith in Christ, we have to remind ourselves about the truth of the gospel. Our pride sneaks up and starts to take credit for things. We are easily offended because we think we deserve to be treated better. We can see other people's faults better than our own. And we need to remind ourselves what God did for us, what we deserved, and who we are. If we don't, the narrative of the world and our flesh will surely take over.

Live out the Gospel

Out of the knowledge of who we are in Christ and through our new identity in Jesus we can be humble in ways never possible before. When your value is rooted in the person of Jesus and not your position, you are free to serve others in ways that aren't self-advancing. When you are secure in your identity in Christ, you can love hard people, be kind to those who are mean, and you will not be easily offended. The humble are not easily humiliated.

This doesn't mean allowing injustice or something improper to continue. Humility can also look like saying, "I love you too much to allow you to do this to me or another person." I'm not talking about

being a doormat. I'm talking about having the same kind of sacrificial and convictional love that Jesus had.

Rest in the Gospel

When your humility doesn't immediately work as you hoped, rest in the gospel. Entrust yourself to the one who judges justly.

"For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (1 Pet. 2:21–25).

Rest in the freedom of who you are in Christ. You are clean! Go low.

I love how John Piper applies this truth:

"Pastors, go low. Elders, go low. Heads of households, go low. Small group leaders, go low. Presidents of companies, owners, supervisors, managers, go low. Mom and dad, go low. Big brothers and sisters, go low. "A" students, go low. Good athletes, go low. Pretty teenage girls, go low to serve. Christian, go low to represent your Savior, to know his joy, and because you are completely clean."⁴

Here's your model: Watch Jesus. Go low.

© College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop.

© College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com

⁴ <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/for-his-sake-and-for-your-joy-go-low>