

A. Washing the Disciples' Feet

John framed the Upper Room episode by emphasizing that it was the exertion of Jesus' love, just as was every aspect of His ministration in the world. This love, bound up in His person and expressing itself in His words and works, tangibly and perfectly manifested the love of the One who sent Him. And having characterized this episode in this way, John immediately turned his attention to the observance of the Passover meal which initiated it. He took note of the meal, but said nothing about it, mentioning it only to provide the context for the matter he was concerned with. And that matter was Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet (13:2-20).

John's assertion of Jesus' "love to the uttermost" (13:1) provides the contextual lens for the entire Upper Room episode and so applies to the foot washing incident. In fact, he juxtaposed his assertion with that incident so that his readers would see in Jesus' actions a profound explication of His love. Not only did His foot-washing highlight His love as self-abasing and self-giving, it pointed forward to the next day and Jesus' supreme act of sacrificial love. So also it showed the apostles what it would look like for them to obey His command to love one another and fulfill their calling in the world (cf. 13:15 with 15:12-13): Such obedience would consist in unbounded self-giving; unqualified devotion to the other, not merely in action, but in heart and mind.

Moreover, John weaved together Jesus' demonstration of His love for His own with His revelation of His betrayer (13:2, 18-19). This latter feature adds a crucial dimension to Jesus' foot-washing act and His interpretation of it: *Even while the adversary was wielding his power against the divine purpose by subjugating one of the Twelve, Jesus was demonstrating God's power unto that purpose by subjecting **Himself** to the Twelve.* In this way John set in sharp contrast the way power operates in the world – that is, the human realm under the sway of the ruler of this world (12:31; cf. 14:30, 16:7-11) – and in the kingdom of God presided over by His Messiah-King. This contrast becomes even more pronounced when Luke's account of the Upper Room episode is woven together with John's (ref. Luke 22:14-30).

1. John described the foot washing as taking place during the Passover meal ("the meal having come") and it likely occurred after the group had gathered at the table, but before they began eating. Dusty roads and open sandals made for dirty feet and it was a customary courtesy for a host to have guests' feet washed as they entered his house. The host himself didn't perform this task, but assigned it to one of his servants, typically the lowest-ranking servant (or one of his young children). In this instance there was no house servant – and certainly none of the disciples was going to stoop to this humiliating task – and so the group was content to recline at the table with unwashed feet.

John further described the scene in terms of two related psychological dynamics: Satan had already swayed Judas Iscariot to decide to deliver Jesus to the authorities (v. 2) and Jesus Himself was aware of it and how this betrayal fit into His Father's purposes (v. 3). What is most notable in John's description is the overt contrast he drew between Satan's apparent triumph and the actual triumph his effort would secure: Jesus recognized that His betrayal unto death was simply the ordained means by which His Father was endowing Him with all authority and dominion. He had come from Israel's God and He was returning to Him to take His throne and begin His reign as King of heaven and earth.

What would appear to all observers to be Jesus' defeat at the hands of His enemies would actually be His triumph over them. And John notably described this victory as already accomplished, emphasizing both its certainty and the important truth that Calvary simply brought to its conclusive climax the triumph which began with the incarnation. The very fact of Jesus' ordination as Yahweh's regal Son spoke to His dominion over all the earth and its inhabitants (Psalm 2:1-9). And so, as He looked upon the man who was about to betray Him to death, Jesus did so knowing that His Father had given all things – even this satanic act of betrayal and its outcome – into His hands (cf. 18:1-11; Matthew 26:36-54).

2. In the context of these two psychological dynamics, and with the disciples reclining at the table, Jesus rose from the meal and, without a word, began making preparations to wash their feet (13:4-5). He then returned with a basin of water and towel and commenced His work. The group must have been stunned by this, but apparently only Peter had the wherewithal to respond (or John chose to record only his response).
 - a. When Jesus knelt to wash his feet, Peter resisted, incredulous that He would lower Himself to perform such a degrading task. Jesus acknowledged Peter's shock and confusion (which he shared with the other apostles), but insisted that he (and they) would understand in time. But Peter was having none of it; the others might allow Jesus to wash their feet, but *he* would never permit it. One might want to assign to Peter an insolent attitude, but his refusal was provoked by his devotion to Jesus, not defiance: Jesus was the *Messiah* – the Son of God and Israel's King (“*Lord*, do you wash my feet?”), and such an act was infinitely beneath His station and dignity (vv. 6-8a). The Twelve regarded themselves as above the degrading task of washing dirty feet; how much more was this true of their King.
 - b. Jesus replied that washing him was essential to Peter having a part with Him. That changed everything; in that case Peter was eager to have Jesus wash all of him that he should have the fullest possible share in his Lord (13:8-9). Peter was zealously devoted to Jesus, but his zeal was misguided and his devotion fragile. The frailty of Peter's devotion would be exposed within hours; the issue at this moment was his misconception of Jesus' design in washing their feet. Thus the Lord explained that Peter and his fellows didn't need a full washing; they (that is, all of them but one) were already clean and needed only to have their feet washed (13:10-11). John recounted this interchange between Jesus and Peter (vv. 6-10) recognizing that Jesus' words interpreted His actions. What Peter needed to hear in order to grasp Jesus' meaning, John believed his readers also needed to hear.
 - With that in mind, Jesus' response to Peter first highlighted the fact that His foot washing activity signified something beyond itself. He intended His actions to be instructive, but beyond what might at first appear. Many Christians treat this episode in a literal manner, taking from it an obligation to wash one another's feet (hence congregations which practice foot-washing as a regular part of their fellowship); others see Jesus' action as symbolic, so that the issue in His example isn't foot-washing per se, but the principle and obligation of humble, selfless service among Christians.

According to John's account, Jesus *did* instruct the Twelve that they were to follow His example and wash one another's feet (v. 14), but it's clear that He issued His charge based on what His actions *signified*: He was calling His apostles to follow His example in terms of the significance of what He was doing rather than the physical act itself. Simply washing one another's feet would not fulfill His directive.

- Jesus connected this foot-washing with the need for cleansing, but the context shows that He wasn't ultimately concerned with His disciples' dirty feet (v. 10). Yes, He knelt before each one of them and washed their feet, but He did so in order to teach them a critically important lesson – one they needed to learn if they were to correctly interpret and rightly respond to the events about to unfold in the ensuing hours. Washing their feet provided the perfect vehicle for this lesson because it spoke both to cleansing and the unrestrained, self-abasing way love gives itself – principles at the very core of what Jesus was about to do for them.

When the confusion, fear and horror of the next day came crashing down upon them, the apostles needed to understand that their Messiah was willingly subjecting Himself to the greatest degradation as a servant giving Himself for the sake of their cleansing. Gathered that night in the Upper Room, the Twelve were baffled by their Lord's actions, but they would come to understand them when He completed His work and sent the illumining Spirit (13:7; cf. 12:12-16, 16:12-13; Acts 1:1-8).

- Jesus' foot-washing activity spoke of the apostles' need for cleansing at His hand, but cleansing associated with sharing in Him. Thus His word to Peter: *If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me* (v. 8). The cleansing Jesus was signifying is connected with union and communion with Him; it is fundamentally relational rather than merely mechanical. That is, one obtains this cleansing *in* and *with* Him, not simply *by* Him. When Jesus accomplished the self-giving work His foot-washing action prefigured, men would be cleansed so as to have a share *with* Him, but by virtue of participating *in* Him – that is, in His resurrection life. The outcome of the Messiah's self-giving was to be the “*washing of regeneration and renewal by the Spirit*” (Titus 3:5; cf. Ezekiel 36:22-27; John 9:1-7, 35-39).
- The significance of the foot-washing helps to explain Jesus' assertion that His apostles were “clean” and only in need of a partial washing. They were clean in the sense that they had embraced Him as the Messiah in accordance with His “word” – i.e., the instruction He'd given them in His works as well as His words (ref. 15:3; cf. 10:22-25, 15:22-25). But they were not clean altogether: They believed that Jesus was Israel's Messiah and they were devoted to Him, *but with natural minds*; they wouldn't be entirely clean until the Spirit “washed” them, and that would not happen until their Lord completed His work and was glorified (ref. 14:1-21).

Reclining at the table that night, the apostles were like a person who has bathed but then needs his feet washed after walking a dusty road to his destination; Jesus' actions spoke to the fact that He was giving Himself to complete their cleansing and they needed to undergo His "washing" to be entirely clean. And just as they extended their feet to Him that evening, so the Twelve would experience the completion of their washing some forty days hence – that is, with one exception. Judas likely yielded that night to Jesus' basin and towel, and yet he remained unclean (vv. 10-11, 18).

Peter clearly was not alone in his struggle to understand Jesus' actions at the meal, but John's record suggests that he perhaps was the most open about it. This is not surprising, for Peter was a man of impetuous zeal who never hesitated to express his thoughts and convictions. He may have been more exuberant than his counterparts, but his zeal, like theirs, was informed and inflamed by his own notions; he was zealous for the Messiah as he imagined him to be. Peter's convictions led him to rebuff Jesus' basin and towel, just as they had (and would again) caused him to scorn His cross. Peter, like all who'd embraced Jesus as Israel's Messiah, needed to own Him *in truth* as He really was, and that meant yielding to and owning His self-abasing, self-giving love, however unsettling that might be. Refusal to do so would strip him of a share in both Jesus' life and His inheritance; having Him on his own terms meant not having Him at all.

3. After completing His task, and building upon His interaction with Peter, Jesus returned to the table and queried the Twelve about their understanding of what He'd just done. Interestingly, John recorded no response from them, but had Jesus follow up His question with His own answer and explanation (13:12-20). The obvious implication is that the apostles *didn't* understand what He'd done and He was going to give them the insight they lacked. They needed to discern His actions, but as they implicated *them*: They were recipients who were to be imitators (vv. 13-18). They were to follow His example as servants imitating their Lord – not servants *obeying* their master, but servants *replicating* their master's self-abasement and submissive service: Motivated by love, Jesus, the Lord and supreme Rabbi, was stooping to take the role of the lowest servant for the good of servants who have no claim on His favor. And if love compelled Him, the Lord, to serve His servants in this way, how could it not compel them to so serve their fellow servants?

Jesus' Father had sent Him into the world as that sort of servant and now He was going to send His chosen apostles ("sent ones") to advance His mission in His name, authority and power. He had interpreted Himself to them in order that they should interpret Him to the world. And they would do so by being His presence in the world (13:20), even as He animated, empowered and directed them by His Spirit. All of this Jesus was about to explain to them, but first they needed to understand the very nature and essence of their calling: They would testify of Him by *manifesting* Him – *by being servants as He was a servant*. And they would manifest Him in this way because of sharing in His life. Thus they needed Him to complete their washing – the washing of regeneration and renewal by His Spirit. Possessing His life and mind and manifesting His paradigm of authority and power, they would be fit vessels to testify to the world of its new King and His kingdom.