

The Gospel of John

Text: John 13

Reading: *Daring Faith*, pp. 121–133

The Farewell Meal and Discourse (John 13:1–17:26)

Chapters 13-17 of John are situated as Jesus' final meal with his disciples before his arrest. They narrate the farewell meal and foot washing (13:1-38), the farewell discourse (14:1–16:33), and Jesus' prayer (17:1-26). Throughout the farewell discourse, acts of love are highlighted as a mark of discipleship and as signs of the disciples' relationship with Jesus. The farewell meal ends with Jesus' prayer that God's love will remain present in the world and that the community's life will be shaped by that love.

The Last Supper (John 13:1–38)

Background: Chapter 13 opens with a third reminder of the proximity of the Passover celebration (11:55, 12:1); the supper that follows occurs before this festival. This timing of events is different from the presentation of Jesus' final meal in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In the Synoptic Gospels, the final meal takes place on the first evening of Passover. In those accounts, Jesus' institution of the Lord's Supper occurs as part of the Passover meal. In John, the meal occurs on the evening before Passover begins, and there is no institution.

The farewell meal begins with a statement of Jesus' perfect love for his own (13:1), Jesus' enactment of that love in the foot washing (13:1-7), and his commandment that the disciples love one another as he has loved them (13:34-35; see also 15:12-14). The foot washing has similar roles to the Lord's Supper in the Synoptics: it enacts and makes visible Jesus' love for his own, and his followers are instructed to do likewise. As a central example of what it means to love, the foot washing scene has an important place in this segment of the Gospel.

A. JESUS WASHES THE DISCIPLES' FEET (13:1-11)

1. The opening verse identifies the time not only with relation to the **Passover** but also to **Jesus' hour**. **The hour** is used symbolically in John to refer to the time of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. The arrival of Jesus' hour marks the end of his ministry in the world and his return to the Father.
2. Knowing that his hour has arrived, Jesus continues to act in love. Jesus loves his disciples as much as it is possible to love ("to the end"). This love is displayed in all that follows, beginning with the foot washing and proceeding to the crucifixion and resurrection. Verses 2-3 make clear that Jesus is about to wash the feet even of the one who betrays him, but with the knowledge that the Father "had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God."
3. Foot washing was an act of hospitality offered to guests after a journey, normally performed by slaves or by the guests themselves. **By washing his disciples' feet, Jesus combines the role of slave and host.** As host, Jesus welcomes his disciples into his "home," his dwelling with the Father (14:2). Yet the narration of Jesus removing his clothes, putting on a towel, washing the feet, and wiping them with his towel suggests the humility of a slave. **His actions define what kind of host Jesus is.**

How does Peter's response indicate that he has perhaps misunderstood what Jesus has been trying to communicate to his disciples about his mission and purpose?

4. Jesus' actions as a slave are offensive to the disciples. Peter speaks on behalf of all the disciples in questioning Jesus: "Lord are you going to wash my feet?" (v. 6). Peter, who cannot understand, does not want to allow Jesus to assume the role of a slave. Jesus' response to him emphasizes the importance of Jesus' actions: the one who is not washed has no "share" with Jesus. At the same time, these words emphasize that the disciples are called to receive what Jesus has to offer.
5. **To have Jesus wash one's feet is to receive an act of hospitality that alters one's relationship with Jesus, and through Jesus, to God.** The foot washing welcomes the disciples into the circle of God's and Jesus' love (14:23, 31; 17:23-24, 26).
6. **As was the case with Jesus' signs, we must respond to that welcome both by receiving the hospitality and by understanding what Jesus has done.** The foot washing is not performed because the disciples have a need to wash. The disciples are already clean. Instead, the foot washing enacts a relationship into which Jesus invites the disciples.
7. Jesus' qualifier, "though not all of you" (v. 10), and the narrator's explanation in verse 11 reinsert Judas into the story. These words remind us that Judas was among those who had their feet washed. Judas, however, is not understood as "clean." Nor does being washed by Jesus make him "clean." The foot washing does not automatically form people as disciples. They must receive and enter into the relationship Jesus offers.

What particular lesson does Jesus seek to teach his disciples by this act of foot washing?

B. JESUS INTERPRETS HIS ACTIONS (13:12-20)

1. Upon returning to the table, Jesus interprets his actions for the disciples. **The foot washing not only invites the disciples into a particular relationship with Jesus but also sets an example for the relationship to others (vv. 14-15).** The disciples are to imitate the foot washing because to do so continues what Jesus has done for them and extends his offer of love.

Why is it necessary for Jesus to emphasize that the slave is not greater than the master, that the one who is sent is not greater than the one who sends (v. 16)?

2. **The point is that, for us as for Jesus, we should be looking away from ourselves, and towards the world we are supposed to be serving.** Where the world's needs and our vocation meet is where we ought to be, ready to take on insignificant roles if that's what God wants, or to be publicly visible if that is our calling.
3. And, as with Jesus, the picture of foot washing is meant to serve not only as a picture of menial tasks we may be called to perform. It also points toward the challenge that Jesus issued to Peter in the last chapter of the book, to follow Jesus all the way to the cross, to lay down life itself in the service of God and the world he came to save.
4. **Most important, perhaps, is that the love that Jesus models in the foot washing is directed toward all of the disciples, Judas included.** Just as Jesus' offer of eternal life is extended even to many who reject it, Jesus acts out this example of love and service even for one who will turn against him. The love that Jesus performs and to which he calls his disciples is extended even to one who rejects Jesus and does not receive his word.

Why does John draw attention to the fact that Jesus washed both Judas' and Peter's feet?

How does Jesus' teaching and example here challenge the way we often understand our own role in serving him and others? Why are we to follow Jesus example?

Given your understanding of why we follow Jesus example, what does that look like today?

C. JESUS PROPHESES HIS BETRAYAL (13:21-30)

1. The presence of Judas has been noted repeatedly in the foot washing story. The story turns to Judas directly at this point. **Jesus identifies his betrayer not with words or pointed fingers, but with another act that is representative of the hospitality he has already shown Judas: he feeds him.**
2. Judas, whose feet Jesus washed, who receives his bread, will betray him. However, the betrayal belongs to a cosmic battle of good and evil (v. 27). Jesus and Satan, not Jesus and Judas, are the real opponents. Yet it is Jesus, not Satan, who exercises control over these events, as evidenced by his words of instruction to Judas in verse 27.
3. What we are now to witness is Judas being used by the forces of darkness to bring a charge against Jesus, the messenger of light. The confrontation between light and darkness, which has been hanging over the Gospel story since the prologue (1:5), is coming to its climax. And Judas has been willingly enlisted among the forces of darkness. The end of verse 30 is one of John's master touches as a storyteller. The door opens onto the dark night, and Judas, who acts in darkness (like the darkness of 3:19-21), disappears into it. Darkness arrives, but the light still shines in it (see 1:5).

How might Jesus' openness to deep friendship (and hurt!) serve as a model for us in our own relationships?

D. THE LOVE COMMANDMENT AND PETER'S RESPONSE (13:31-38)

1. With Judas' departure, the decisive moment of glorification is "now," at the unfolding of the events of Jesus' hour. And the heart of what Jesus reveals of God is the way in which Jesus makes God's love visible in and for the world (vv. 33-34). Jesus loves his disciples "to the utmost." This love is modeled in the foot washing and enacted fully in his death and resurrection, and his disciples are to love one another the same way.

Love is central in many parts of the Old Testament. Leviticus 19:18 commanded the Israelites to love their neighbors as themselves. So in what way is Jesus' commandment "new"? What more does it ask of Jesus' disciples?

2. **The commandment to love is not new (see Lev. 19:18); what is new is the shaping of that love according to the life and death of Jesus.**
3. The commandment to love comes in the midst of the uncertainty created by Jesus' departure. Love for one another, like the love Jesus has demonstrated in the foot washing, is to become the defining mark of those who follow Jesus. The disciples will stay behind, yet they are called to model their behavior on his.
4. Peter presents himself as willing to follow Jesus' model of love—to "lay down my life"—but Jesus' prediction calls that into question. Peter does not yet know the full extent of Jesus' love.

This love is a badge that the Christian community wears before the watching world. As we read Jesus' words, some are bound to cringe in shame at the way in which professing Christians have treated each other down the years. Many have turned the gospel into a weapon of their own various cultures and hit each other over the head with it, while others have defined the "one another" so tightly that it means only, "love the people who reinforce your own sense of who you are."

How can we begin to live out Jesus' command in a way that genuinely communicates to the world how much he has loved us?

Points for Home

1. The call of John 13 (esp. vv. 12-15, 34-35) is to embody the love and service of Jesus for one another. Jesus does not simply issue a general call for service; he issues a call to give as he gives, to love as he loves.
2. To love one another as Jesus loves us is to live a life thoroughly shaped by a love that knows no limits, by a love whose expression brings the believer closer in relationship with God, with Jesus, and with one another.
3. Jesus promised that the community's love for one another would be a signal to people ("everyone," v. 35) that they were Jesus' disciples, yet that signal is crippled when we fall prey to divisions and discord within our own community. The church's witness in the world is always hurt and diminished when hatred and lack of love mark Christians' dealings with one another.
4. Thank God for the radical act of service Jesus performed for his disciples in the washing of their feet, and ask that he would show you what it looks like to follow his example in your life. Pray that he would help you and all Christians to love one another as he has loved you so that the world might come to believe in Christ and know his deep love and friendship.

Sources:

Gail O'Day, *The Gospel of John*

Gail O'Day and Susan Hulen, *John*

N.T. Wright, *The Gospel of John*