

## John: Foot Washing

John 13:1-17

By Dr. Derek Thomas

March 23, 2003

As we continue in our studies in the gospel of John, we come to chapter 13, and to this incident that is recorded for us in the opening verses of the chapter of the washing of the feet of the disciples. Hear with me the word of God as we find it in the first verse of John 13.

Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He should depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who are in the world, He loved them to the end. And during supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, *the son* of Simon, to betray Him, *Jesus*, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, rose from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself about. Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. And so He came to Simon Peter. He said to Him, "Lord, do You wash my feet?" Jesus answered and said to him, "What I do you do not realize now, but you shall understand hereafter." Peter said to Him, "Never shall you wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head." Jesus said to him, "Who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you." For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, "Not all of you are clean." And so when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments and reclined *at the table* again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

For I have given you an example that you also should do as I did to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, neither is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. I do not speak of all of you. I know

the ones I have chosen; but *it is* that the Scripture may be fulfilled, 'He who eats my bread has lifted up his heel against Me.' From now on I am telling you before *it* comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am *He*. Truly, truly I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and He who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.

Amen. May God bless to us the reading of His Holy and inerrant Word. Let's pray together.

*Our Father in heaven, as we bow in Your presence this evening, we ask for Your blessing once again knowing that without You, we can do nothing. Hear us Lord, for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Jesus is about to enter a war. I say that because John, especially in the gospel, uses almost military language to describe what Jesus is about to do; the steadfastness with which He sets His face to go to Jerusalem, and now He's hours away from betrayal, and trial, and crucifixion, and death.

How do you prepare your disciples for such an eventuality? Shakespeare had Henry V, in the Battle of Agincourt, say those famous words: "Imitate the action of the tiger. Stiffen up the sinews, summon up the blood." I was reading this week the words of Lieutenant Colonel Tim Collins, who is one of the British leaders in the First Battalion of the Royal Irish Fusiliers, as he was preparing his men to cross into Iraq, preparing his men for battle. I won't read all of what he said, but these are some of his words: "There are some of you who are alive at this moment who will not be alive shortly. Those who do not wish to go on that journey, we will not send. As for the others, I expect you to rock their world; wipe them out if that is what they choose. But if you are ferocious in battle, remember to be magnanimous in victory. Iraq is steeped in history. It is the site of the Garden of Eden, of the great flood, of the birthplace of Abraham; tread lightly there. You will see things that no man could pay to see, and you will have to go a long way to find a more decent, generous, and upright people than the Iraqis. You will be embarrassed by their hospitality even though they have nothing." To his 800 men, he says to them, "It is my foremost intention to bring every single one of you out alive, but there may be people among you who will not see the end of this campaign. We will put them in their sleeping bags and send them back; there will be no time for sorrow. The enemy should be in no doubt that we are his nemesis, and that we are bringing about his rightful destruction." And so he goes on. It's a very moving speech.

How does Jesus prepare His disciples for the nemesis that is about to transpire in the hours that are to come? Over these next few weeks, we are going to follow our Lord in the final few hours of His earthly life. This is a transition point in the gospel of John. In chapters 1-12, we have followed the chapters which has been called the book of signs; the miracles. The seven signs in particular, that John has singled out, that portray the identity of Jesus as the Son of God.

But now, in chapter 13, we've moved to the upper room. This is now the book of glory. Jesus veils Himself from the world and now discloses something of His glory, something of the relationship He has with His Father in heaven, to His disciples. Calvin says in his commentary on John's gospel, "If the other gospels show us Christ's body, John shows us His soul." John Stott has said it, and also a Scottish minister by the name of Charles Ross, once said that "If Scripture is like a temple, John 13-17 is the inner Sanctuary." In a way that is characteristic of John's gospel.

What we have is an action that is followed by a discourse, and the scene is described for us in the opening five verses. There's another description of it in verse 12. It was the slave's task, the servant's task, on arrival at a house to wash someone's feet. It would happen upon entry. You would sit, or perhaps recline, your sandals would be taken off and left at the door just as they would in Middle Eastern countries to this day. I preached in Korea just last week and I had to leave my shoes at the front door of the church.—done upon entry. A servant would wash your feet. And no one has done it so Jesus rises, divests Himself of His outer garments, wraps a towel around Him, gets a bowl of water and begins to wash the disciples' feet.

And you understand that as this particular incident is described, it becomes parabolic. It becomes a lesson in something far greater than just washing feet. It becomes symbolic of what Jesus has come to do. It becomes symbolic of the very heart of a disciple, of the very heart of a servant. And what we have in this particular incident, in parabolic form, is that which Paul gives expression to in Philippians, chapter 2. Speaking of Jesus, who, "being in the form of God thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation;" and He humbles Himself and is found in fashion as a man, and in the form of a servant. And that's what we have here; a description of what 'being found in the form of a servant' actually looks like. I want to try and enter in to the mind of Jesus as He approaches His final hours, and I want us to see three things that are upon His mind, with crucifixion within hours.

### **I. Jesus knows His death is near.**

The first is that He knows, as we read in verse 1, and John puts all of these three things right up at the heading of this incident, "Knowing that His hour had come." We saw something of this last week in verse 23 of chapter 12. Jesus answered them saying, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified." Hitherto, in John's gospel, we've read things like, "His hour had not yet come." He withdraws sometimes from public gaze because His hour had not yet come, but now His hour has come; the time has arrived. It's time to cross the Rubicon. It's time to make that entry. Very, very shortly, He will be betrayed; very, very shortly, He will be arrested; very, very shortly, He will be tried and crucified. I think it was Samuel

Johnson who said, "A man who knows that he's going to be hanged in a fortnight, concentrates his mind wonderfully." Just as those men being spoken to by that British officer, apparently some ten miles from the Iraqi border, being told that some of them would not come back; that some of them would be put in sleeping bags and sent home and there would be no time for mourning. That concentrates the mind. Jesus was going to face pain of unimaginable proportions.

When we are facing pain, or when the advent of pain is upon us, isn't it at such times that we justify our concentration upon ourselves? Isn't it at such times when we are on the threshold of our torment that we usually want to say to ourselves, "This is time for others to show their love and respect and sympathy to *me*."

I want us to see here the heart of Jesus; I want us to see the servant-like heart of Jesus; that on the threshold of His own pain, He has the needs of the disciples on His mind. He has this simple, humbling gesture of the need of their feet to be washed. These men are tired and Jesus ministers to them knowing that His hour had come.

I don't want to trifle with this text, but it's a very profound lesson, isn't it? Sometimes we are called to serve others when we are blinded by our own tears. Sometimes we are called to serve others when we cannot see the way forward, when there is darkness all around us, when we are pressed by our own difficulties. And at that time, we're called upon to serve others. Isn't it tempting to say at such times, "Can't you see that *I'm* busy? Can't you see *my* pain? Can't you see *my* needs? Can't you see *my* burdens?" Isn't it tempting for us to say on such occasions, "*I* haven't time for you now. I've got to concentrate on *myself* now." It may be in our relationships with our spouses, it may be in our relationships with our children, it may be in our most intimate of settings. And Jesus is saying, "My hour has come. I know what is before Me. I see it clearly now. It dawns upon my mind, it dawns upon my consciousness what lies before Me." And He does this astonishing act. He is thinking about others, and He's thinking about His disciples, and He's thinking about their needs; and He divests His outer garments, and He wraps a towel around Himself, and He begins to wash the disciples' feet.

## **II. He loved His disciples to the end.**

And then secondly, not only does He know that His hour has come; but in the second place, we are told that He loved His disciples even to the end. Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them even to the end. He never gives up on them. Think about it. These twelve—yes, for a minute the twelve, including Judas—who are so slow to believe; who are so unteachable, who are so uncomprehending, whose vision is so earth bound, who are so self centered; and as the crisis deepens and things are getting worse, they will deny Him and they

will flee from Him and they will run. At the time of His crucifixion, there will barely be a disciple present—just John—and He loves them. Fickle and frail and fleeting as their faith is, He loves them. It's not a pretty sight. There's something profoundly disappointing about these men. And yet, He loves them to the end. His love isn't blind; He loves these men. He chose these men; He's been with them for three years. He knows them better than they know themselves. He knows all about them. He knows them at their worst; He knows what they are capable of doing. He gives a prediction about two of them here in this very upper room—about Judas and Peter. He sees them in their worst possible light and He still loves them. He knows what they are capable of. He knows the fickleness of their hearts and He loves them. He is going to deny Himself and He's going to lay down His life and He's going to die for them. “Alas, and did my Savior bleed and did my Sovereign die. Would He devote that sacred head for such a worm as I?”

But there's a deeper meaning here. He loved them, we are told, to the end. He loved them to the end; not just the end of His earthly life, but He loved them to the extreme limit in that sense. He loved them, knowing what that love was going to cost Him. He loved them as now, through the months and years of reflection upon the teaching of Scripture as to the nature and demands of the Servant of God, He knew now, in perhaps a way that He had never seen clearer before, of what the cost of loving them would mean. It was inescapable now that He was going to die. He knew it. It was etched upon His consciousness through His prayerful communion with the Father. It had been revealed to Him now in all its fullness. And here in this upper room, He is aware of what the cost of that will be and He's prepared to go to the very limit. He's prepared to go to the very end. It will cost Him unimaginable suffering and pain. He will endure special torments, the torments of a condemned man. He will become sin; He will identify with sin. Can you imagine? No, you can't imagine. What it means for pure holiness to identify with sin—the revulsion of it. He will be dealt with as sin deserves. Sin will be condemned in His body, cursed in His person. There will be no sparing of Him. There will be no mitigation of the wrath of God; it will be poured out upon Him and poured out upon Him in all of its fullness. And in the darkness there will be no light. Even the sun will refuse to shine, even the earth will refuse to hold Him in its ground and He will be cast out into outer darkness where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth.

And He will descend into hell. I know that some of you have trouble with that phrase. But He will descend into hell in the sense that He will experience it. Because what is hell? Hell is being cut off from God; hell is being cast into outer darkness. And Jesus will cry upon the cross, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?” He will become the one upon whom God cannot look, cannot cast His eye. And a veil will be drawn over His consciousness of His own Sonship so that He doesn't cry, “My Father, My Father; but My God, My God!” He'll enter a black hole, where law and reason and meaning make no sense. And He will cry, “Why?” And He will hear no answer, and no voice will speak, and no angels will come, and He will be cast out, and He will be in darkness. “Having loved His own

who were in the world, He loved them to the very end.” To that point, where *the last drop* of God's wrath will be experienced; and there will be no mitigation, and there will be no let up; there will be no holding back. *On the cross my burden gladly bearing, He bled and died to take away my sin.* And He's willing to bear that. As He reclined in that upper room to partake of the Passover meal with His disciples, with all of that before Him within hours, dawning now that would make you tremble at the very thought of it; what does He do? He divests His outer garments and wraps a towel around Him and washes the disciples' feet.

### **III. He did all of this for His people even though conscious of His own deity.**

But there's a third thing that He is conscious of that John brings to our attention. He knows His divine origin and purpose—He does all of that in the full consciousness of His own deity—knowing that His hour had come that He should depart out of this world to the Father. “Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them even to the end.” And in verse 3, it says, “Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God.” What a wonderful statement of the deity of Christ. That He is conscious, that He has come from God, and that He is going back to God; that He's sat at the same table as His Father in heaven, and that He is going back there. And in the full consciousness of who He was, and in the full consciousness of His native glory and His essential deity, He takes off His outer clothing and wraps a towel around Him and washes the disciples' feet. In the full consciousness of His deity He does that.

And what does that say to us? It says that the impulse to serve lies at the very heart of God. God the Father serving the Son; the Son serving the Father. And it is traced right back to the Trinity itself, and Peter is amazed. And Peter says, “You are going to wash *my* feet? *Never!*” he says. And Jesus reminds him, “What I do now you may not understand, but you will understand hereafter.” How true that was; because it's John who makes that understood for us. And what was it that Jesus was demonstrating in the full consciousness of His deity? It was several things.

First of all, Jesus turns this into a parable, and when Peter says, “You'll never wash my feet,” Jesus says to him in verse 8, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with Me.” Unless you are willing to bow before Me and allow Me to wash away your sin; you have no part with Me. You have no fellowship with Me, you have no union with Me. That's what He's saying.

But then Jesus turns it into something a little more than that because Peter - and don't you love Peter - Isn't this so typical of Peter - Out of the frying pan and into the fire - having uttered those two words which cannot go together -- “Never, Lord,” he says, “Not my feet but my hands and my head.” And so Jesus turns it now into another parable and says, “You are clean.” He's referring, of course, to

the custom that before you went and ate the Passover meal you would have bathed, you would have washed, so that when you get there the only thing that you would need to do would be to wash your feet because of the dust that would accumulate upon your bare feet and sandals. And Jesus says, "You are clean. And all that is necessary now is to wash your feet." He's probably alluding to the difference between justification and sanctification. They're already clean; not all of them as He says, because of Judas. We'll see more of Judas next time. The second half of John 13 will expand upon the treachery of Judas. We'll leave Judas aside for a minute. Not all of them were clean. But Peter, the eleven, were clean; and all that they needed was to have their feet washed.

The thing preeminently that Jesus wants them to understand as He tells us in verse 15, "I gave you an example that you should do as I did to you." That at the heart of discipleship, that at the heart of what it means to be a Christian, is a willingness to humble ourselves even as Jesus humbled Himself. Now, the Church took this literally. In the seventh century in Spain and Gaul, this was introduced almost like a sacrament into the Church. The Mennonites and the Seventh Day Adventists still practice foot washing as part of the ritual of the church. The Pope and the patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church do also on some occasions. But that's to miss the point. The point of what Jesus is saying here is the point that Peter himself understood when he writes his first epistle and he says in verse 5 in chapter 5, "Clothe yourselves with humility." Amy Carmichael, missionary in India, and many of you have read her life story and her beautiful poetry, would ask some of those converted high-caste Indians to demonstrate the integrity of their conversion by being willing to dig trenches for low-caste Indians. "I gave you an example that you should do as I did to you."

I wonder tonight, in the face of the cross, in the face of the enormity of the love of Christ for us, is there anything that you are not willing to do for your brother or for your sister, or perhaps, your spouse? And Jesus is saying, "Get off your high horse; put down those proud peacock feathers, and do as I did to you. If I am willing to go to the end for you, what is it that you are not willing to do for one another?"

And that is such a profound and humbling lesson, and therein lies our sin. And therein is our heart revealed. And may God have mercy upon us and enable us to do even as Jesus did, denying ourselves for the sake of one another and for the sake of Jesus Christ. Let's pray together.

*Our Father in heaven, greater love hath no man than this than a man lay down his life for a friend. And in the finished work of Jesus on the cross we see love unimaginable, and we pray now that as we ponder these truths in our own hearts; give us, we pray, that servant's heart in our relationships with each other. For Jesus' sake, Amen.*

## **A Guide to the Evening Service**

### The Themes of the Service

Tonight's passage in the Gospel of John takes us into the Upper Room for the first time. We will be here for awhile. It is like entering the inner sanctuary of the temple! It is holy ground indeed! The foot washing incident is what is before us tonight.

### The Psalm, Hymns and Spiritual Songs Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness

Written by the German, von Zinsendorf, a Moravian, this hymn has become one of the best-known hymns on the subject of justification by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness  
My beauty are, my glorious dress;  
'Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,  
With joy shall I lift up my head.  
Bold shall I stand in Thy great day;  
For who aught to my charge shall lay?  
Fully absolved through these I am  
From sin and fear, from guilt and shame.

Are Christians merely forgiven, or do they possess the righteousness of Christ? Recently the time-honored understanding of the doctrine of justification has come under attack. Many question how – or if – we receive the full righteousness of Christ. Martin Luther said that if we understand justification “we are in the clearest light; if we do not know it, we dwell in the densest darkness.” As recipients of the imputation of Christ's righteousness, we therefore enjoy full acceptance with God and the everlasting inheritance of life and joy.

### **From Depths of Woe I Raise to Thee** (RUF Tune, Psalm 130)

Another of Luther's psalm paraphrases. This one gives us a window into his soul and into the tremendous peace of heart he derived from God's gracious justification in Jesus Christ. Master this hymn and you're on the way to understanding justification by faith and its benefits. We sing it tonight to the popular RUF tune

### O, the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus

This marvelous hymn was composed by Samuel Trevor Francis (1834-1925). Not only is the text of this hymn set to a wonderful Welsh tune (called “Ebenezer” or “Ton-Y-Botel”), but the words are rich and expressive. As the title indicates, the great theme of the hymn is the surpassing love of Christ. We can never get



too much of a robust musical expression of the love of Christ that challenges us to draw the comforting practical implications of the rich theology of Christ' love found in the Scriptures, and that's precisely what this hymn does.

### The Sermon

There is, of course, something symbolic of Jesus' death in this act of humiliation whereby Jesus' divests Himself of His outer garments and begins to wash the disciples' feet. There is, too, something astonishingly reassuring about the nature of Jesus' love for the disciples. "Having loved His own who were in the world He loved them to the end" (John 13:2). His love never faltered, never gave up, never ceased to manifest itself. In the agony of what lay before Him, becoming increasingly conscious of it, Jesus nevertheless found time for His disciples and their needs. But He loved them knowing what it will cost Him. He takes "the form of a servant" and mimics what servanthood means: taking the lowliest position. Imagine it: the Son of God washing our feet.

That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing  
He bled and died, to take away my sin

It is the poignancy of His question that gets us: "you should wash one another's feet." Not literally, I think, but certainly in that spirit. Is the church a community of foot washers? To ask the question is to answer it. Peter was offended by it all; and probably, we are, too. This is too demeaning, too servile, too menial for me. I deserve better than this. And I don't want a Savior who is doing chores fit for the maid! But God will have it no other way. It is this way or not at all. We cannot get into heaven by washing our own feet! Self-religion damns. It is our greatest crime. Jesus saves! Hallelujah.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

*This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.*

*Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.*

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

**Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine***

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).