

## The Densest Moment | Jesus Christ's Farewell Conversation

### *Serving Like Jesus Served*

John 13.1-17

1.29.23

*Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. <sup>2</sup> During supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him, <sup>3</sup> 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, <sup>4</sup> got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself.*

*<sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> So He came to Simon Peter. He said to Him, "Lord, do You wash my feet?" <sup>7</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, "What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter." <sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, then wash not only my feet, but also my hands and my head." <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you." <sup>11</sup> For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, "Not all of you are clean."*

*<sup>12</sup> 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?" <sup>13</sup> "You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. <sup>14</sup> "If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup> "For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. <sup>16</sup> "Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. <sup>17</sup> "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.*

**We're looking at the major speeches of Jesus Christ (red letters)** and this year that brings us to *The Upper Room Discourse*. Last week, we started the transition away from the crowds by looking at the PATHOS (emotional intensity) we should find persuasive. This week the ETHOS (the credibility of the Speaker) and from here out we'll see the LOGOS (content/logic to motivate us).

Only John gives us five chapters of conversation at a supper and the long discussion (*Upper Room Discourse*) begins with...a puzzling action...something the Leader does that HE has no business DOING... something ... odd... a breach of protocol so unexpected and contrary to the way things are supposed to be, it leaves the disciples speechless and troubled.

Jerusalem is packed with people and the public is clamoring for a king. Jesus Christ knows that in hours He'll be arrested... *So, He leaves* all the crowds, the applause and excitement and the frenzy...and He retreats with His friends (one of whom is betraying Him) *and they settle in* to eat the Passover meal in a second-story rented room (maybe a roof-top).

The strange and striking act that starts the dialog forever establishes the credibility of the Speaker – the ETHOS. But at first, it's NOT understood at all!

“If you will be My disciple and a leader in My movement then you must know three paradoxical truths”:

- 1) An Example of WHAT God Requires of You**
- 2) An Emblem of WHAT GOD Does for You**
- 3) An Engine to DO what God Requires**

The dinner has started (v.2, “during the supper”) and no one volunteered. Someone *should have* volunteered but no one volunteered. Perhaps the disciples are thinking, “WE are with a Head of State and WE should have service-people to do these things... and I’m sure in just a few days when these crowds finish partying... they’ll make our Rabbi KING; we’ll be his cabinet and *then* ...we’ll HAVE servants to wash our feet and dry-clean our shirts but for now we’ll have to go...unwashed...*until the servants arrive.*”

So, the meal begins and that’s when it happens. Jesus Christ gets up and clothes Himself in the uniform of a maid... a shoe-shine boy... and goes to it.

And it’s just... weird... it doesn’t *feel* right ... some *servant* should be shining *HIS* shoes! And *then*... He comes to Peter and Peter (as he often does) he says what everyone else is thinking but is afraid to speak.

Peter has two objections: FIRST, (v. 6) “This is odd, Lord... Do YOU (high up!) wash MY (low down) feet?” as if to say, “This isn’t how it’s supposed to be with You and me! YOU are up there and I’m down here. You’re the guest of Honor!”

And Jesus says, “What I (*HIGH*) DO you (*LOW*) do not REALIZE now, but ...you will”

Then Peter’s second point: “NO! You will NEVER wash my feet! You will not lower yourself in this humiliating/unpresidential WAY... NEVER!” And the Rabbi answers, “If I don’t humble MYSELF, we can’t be friends because this is why I came into the world... it’s the meaning of My coming!!

“You mean you came be a foot-washer...?”

“I came to humble myself.” It’s an *EXAMPLE for you to follow*. “*I just showed you how to love and I want YOU to imitate that.*” Humility, service, love IS the ethic of My Kingdom.”

And Jesus offers a very definite logic for our imitation of His love. V. 13 “*You call me Teacher and Lord... and I am. (i.e. YOU YOURSELVES SAY that I’m above you and it’s true... YOU DON’T YET KNOW exactly what that means but SOON YOU WILL).*” So (now the LOGIC): if I (Master) lowered MYSELF A LOT for you...then, can’t YOU (Servants) lower yourselves A LITTLE for others?”

If you find some person you suppose to be in some way lower than you... and if you could somehow measure the moral distance or social or intellectual or economic difference between you and that lower person... *if that distance could be measured in wattage* ... THE other person... with bad teeth or bad grammar or that judgmental religious hypocrite or that angry lesbian activist or the snooty, pseudo-intellectual, pretentious jerk you have to see at family gatherings ...if all the wattage HE has is *a dim flash-light* and YOU with your cool clothes and good teeth or your enlightened, open-minded tolerance or your excellent grasp of orthodox Christian doctrine IF THAT MAKES YOU a bright *100-watt-bulb* ... These disciples (and remember that Jesus apparently washed the feet of Judas too) but these disciples are being shown the meaning of love. Love is to give your stuff and your help to people in need, people who can't repay you or give you something because they're in need. They needed their feet washed and He loved them by giving them what He could do for them.

They've identified Jesus as the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah. They're "nobodies" but He's the most important Person who ever lived – the King of kings. He's lowering Himself further than they will ever be asked to lower themselves! *"For I gave 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."*

"You guys call Me 'Teacher' which puts ME above you... so don't act like you're above Me by refusing to help people who are below you."

Now, before we look at the emblem, something symbolic, a sign-ificant string of words IN this passage, we should warn: this doesn't only apply to heroic love. We all flatter ourselves by thinking that, "If I'm ever on a ship that hits an iceberg and there's no room in the lifeboat – I'll give up my seat!" or we think, "If I'm ever in a leper-colony and I'm asked to wash the infected wounds of the patients – I will follow the example of Jesus!"

"I love humanity, but I can't stand that guy at work!" Heroic moments usually come around a few times in a person's lifetime if at all. Love means listening to people you find to be boring. Love means taking criticism from a family member without resentment. Love means helping someone at work or in the family or neighborhood who needs help but clearly doesn't DESERVE it. Love is emptying the dishwasher and telling no one that you did it.

Love, according to the example of Jesus is meeting needs and serving those who are beneath you by all societal standards in everyday, mundane, non-heroic ways, to sacrifice my comfort for the good of another.

Jesus Christ says, "If you don't love you're IMPLYING that YOU'RE superior to ME." It's illogical in the extreme. Arrogance is the ultimate absurdity.

The social or moral distance between you and someone you consider a bore or shameless or rude or self-righteous is inches... Why then, when asked to do some lowly act a service for them (like listening) why do you act like you're being asked to cross an ocean?

At most you're stepping over a tiny puddle.

Then Peter acts like he gets it, but he doesn't... because the "later" hasn't come yet... that would come only after the Cross and the resurrection and the revelation of Who it is they were dealing with these three years. They know He's Messiah...but they don't really know what a Messiah IS or DOES.

But woven INTO this episode is a theological explanation of what's happening: the foot-washing is EMBLEMATIC, i.e. a sign or a symbol of what Jesus Christ is about...symbolic of God's Being and Nature.

Jesus Christ is God incarnate humbling Himself *to live the life of love* that we've all failed to live and come to die in the place of the ... the guilty. Seven verbs in v. 4-5 tell the whole story of our redemption:

Our friend, Dr Warren Gage wrote about this emblem that vv. 4-5: *"The 7 verbs metaphorically depict Christ's entire ministry. Jesus rose from his throne in heaven, he laid aside his robe of glory, he took upon himself human flesh, he girded himself as a bond-slave, he poured out his very life, he washed his people in his cleansing blood and water, and one day, he will dry away all their tears."*

Last week we saw the message in a bottle (the bottle of perfume that had to be broken for the whole house to be filled with fragrance – like Jesus Christ had to be broken to fill the world with the scent of grace) Last week: message in a bottle; this week: message in a basin – to wash us, God had to humble Himself.

He gets up from the table... lays aside His robe and dresses like a bus-boy... It's a symbol: GOD GETS UP FROM HIS THRONE... lays aside His prerogatives... and veils His GOD-ness in our humanity.

And yet, our humanity doesn't hide the true nature of God, it actually reveals the heart of God: God is a Servant, God is LOVE... to love is to serve. That's the nature of God and now ... in that upstairs room... we see it: IT'S A REVELATION! God is the Giver, the Foot-washer, the Humble King...

WE thought God was needy/insecure WE thought God was hungry... that to get along with God... we had to feed Him... had to carry the vestal-virgin up the mountain and throw her into the volcano, then run back down and hope and beg and pray that God was satisfied... WE thought *God wants His pound of flesh* and those who give it to Him make Him happiest!

BUT Jesus Christ is only *demonstrating* what the Hebrew Prophets taught: e.g. Psalm 50 where God says, "If I were hungry, I wouldn't tell you; the world is mine and all it contains... (the cattle on a 1000 hills)" God is not needy and demanding and insecure!

It's a huge challenge to Peter's theology. It's the teaching of GRACE. God doesn't *need us* or *need anything we can give Him*... God is self-satisfied. He's the Source of satisfaction.

God comes to earth in Jesus Christ, not to GET but to GIVE... not to judge but to save... "not to BE served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." (Mk 10.45)

THIRD, an EXAMPLE of what God requires, an EMBLEM of what God does for us and THIRD, an Engine to DO what God Requires.

One can only follow the EXAMPLE of this strange act IF one sees and knows the EMBLEM – there's an "if" (a condition).

IF the symbolism is *known*, only THEN can the act be reproduced... Three times Jesus Christ draws

attention to this:

v. 7 “you don’t realize now but you will hereafter”

v. 12 “Do you KNOW what I have done to you?”

v.17 “*If you KNOW these things, you are blessed if you do them*”

If you know WHAT?

Well, if you know WHO this IS who washes the feet of the fishermen...AND just what He’s come to DO for YOU...if you get it...receive it...if you believe.

IF you see and realize the significance of this VERY strange action, the King and Foot-washer... if you see it for the emblem it is, that IN Jesus Christ, God has laid aside His royal robes and put on our humanity, so that we could know His humility... you have to *know* who He is... and be a recipient of GRACE.

AND this knowing is more than a purely intellectual apprehension...it is, in a way, a sharing in the knowledge that MOVED Jesus Christ Himself to serve on that momentous night (He uses the word, “See”). Jesus is saying, “If you SEE the way I SEE.”

The passage starts with the words: “Jesus, SEEING His hour had come, SEEING that He should leave this world and return to the Father (THEN AGAIN in v.3) SEEING that the Father had given all things into HIS hands, SEEING that He had COME FROM GOD and WAS GOING BACK to God, *He rose from the supper*”

It's the BIGGEST SURPRISE in the whole text... we expect it to say, “*Jesus, knowing His high position called His men to serve Him...*” But *instead*, knowing His place therefore Jesus Christ was secure enough to serve. SEEING, therefore, HE IS SERVING. Love comes from a place of security...OR else it’s an attempt to get the loved one to repay you with affirmation, gratitude or some other form of security – if service comes from a place of need and not security it’s really a transaction. (And you know what they call a person who “loves” as a transaction? An escort.)

When we SEE... what Jesus came to do... what joy and exaltation awaits Him when His work is completed... when we see this and receive it, we’re secure in the love of the Father, in the strength and plan of God... We then have nothing to prove ... because His Father will vindicate us as He did Jesus Christ.

For us, the point is: *only* IF we get it ... can we do it. Following the EXAMPLE is predicated on SEEING the EMBLEM. The Son of God stripped Himself of His glory that I might now enjoy this level of security... God has served me, *Jesus Christ gave Himself for me.*

I KNOW...I see...that I’m a great sinner and Jesus Christ is a great Savior. HE HAS STOOPED to serve me...God dimmed His glory for me.

In one way, I have the lowest self-esteem anyone can imagine... I am the lowest of men, *better than NO ONE*, the *chief* of sinners, the *orphan* and *rebel*, the *vandalizer of shalom*... a child of wrath (as Paul says, Eph 2.1-3) ...not a dim bulb...a broken bulb.

But I’ve also found the *highest* self-esteem ... I am *adopted* as a child of God... “safe and secure from all alarm”... God has embraced me and no one can take that away...totally secure (Rom 8.33ff) IN

Christ! I SEE from whence I've come... and I SEE my destiny ... SEE that I've been redeemed...SEE what I'm now doing...and I know a new identity that FREES me to love in a new way. (Annoyances are not so *annoying* when I am SEEING... ..Sacrifices don't feel so *sacrificial*.... Insults don't really matter... Applause and recognition is less *addictive*) ...When I see/know/believe, everything else is small...and grace IS big and powerful...

I'm able to lower myself...without being condescending... able to give myself without having to be noticed, without having to watch the clock/phone.

It enables you to actually listen to people...not just waiting for a break so you can speak and sound impressive (no need!)

I know what it is to be loved (to have my guilt removed and to know God as Father) ... And to the degree that I'M SEEING that, I'm free to rise from the table, lay aside my rights and wash the feet of anyone in need.

#### QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

"It's just the same story as a doctor once told me," observed the elder. "He was a man getting on in years, and undoubtedly clever. He spoke as frankly as you, though in jest, in bitter jest. 'I love humanity,' he said, 'but I wonder at myself. The more I love humanity in general, the less I love man in particular. In my dreams,' he said, 'I have often come to making enthusiastic schemes for the service of humanity, and perhaps I might actually have faced crucifixion if it had been suddenly necessary; and yet I am incapable of living in the same room with anyone for two days together, as I know by experience. As soon as anyone is near me, his personality disturbs my self-complacency and restricts my freedom. In twenty-four hours, I begin to hate the best of men: one because he's too long over his dinner; another because he has a cold and keeps on blowing his nose. I become hostile to people the moment they come close to me. But it has always happened that the more I detest men individually the more ardent becomes my love for humanity.'

- Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880)

(The apostle) Paul can't imagine *believing* the gospel... without *becoming* like the gospel... For Paul, this is a single act of knowing. To believe the gospel necessarily leads to entering into Christ's dying and rising. Knowing Jesus in these two complementary ways makes our knowledge of him richer, more complete. We embrace the whole pattern of Jesus's life as the story of our own life.

When we embrace the *fellowship of his sufferings*, it changes everything. Instead of nourishing slights and running from the suffering inherent in life and love, we embrace Christ in the suffering. It's all about who you know.

– Paul E. Miller, *The J-Curve: Dying and Rising with Jesus in Everyday Life* (Crossway, 2019; pp. 68-69)