

The Servant King

John 13:1–17

Studies in John #29

“**W**HAT’S past is prologue.”¹ William Shakespeare’s famous phrase reminds us that past history leads up to today and then into the future. In the Gospel of John, chapters 1–12 have prepared us for what’s to come. The Word has become flesh (1:14). He’s performed seven signs all to show that the age of the Messiah has come and he’s spoken to the masses to say that he’s that Messiah. All this historical narrative from the pen of the apostle John brings us to what is called “The Upper Room Discourse” in chapters 13–17. In the stories before, Jesus has focused on the crowds in public; now he’s preparing his disciples for his death in a private room. Another stylistic feature that’s interesting is that in the chapters before, Jesus performed a sign and then explained it. In this latter part of the book that’s reversed: Jesus explains first *then* he goes to the cross.²

As in in chapter 12, John reminds us that **the Feast of the Passover** is near (v. 1). This was that ancient festival of the Lord’s judgment passing over his people on their final night in Egypt because a sacrificial lamb had been slain on their behalf. It’s the night on which Jesus, the Lamb of God, would be sacrificed, and all those on whom that blood marks them do not receive condemnation but reconciliation with God. That moment drew near **when**

Jesus knew that his hour—that time of his crucifixion—**had come to depart out of this world to the Father** (v. 1). This is intense! Here's the big thing you gotta see at the beginning of the Upper Room Discourse. Jesus, the Son of God who took upon himself humanity, is about to go back to the glories and joys of his Father in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. With his sufferings and subsequent glories on his mind, what does John saying he did? **Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end** (v. 1), meaning, to the end of his life.³ The whole Discourse is prefaced in the love of Jesus! We know from John 3:16 that God loves the world. I mentioned that there are differing senses in which we can use the language of God's love. He loves creation in one sense. He loves all humanity whom he made in his image yet rebelled against him in another sense. But most particularly he loves his chosen people. J.C. Ryle said, "The love of Christ to sinners is the very essence and marrow of the Gospel."⁴ It's this specific love for his precious people that is like a heading for his Upper Room Discourse. And in that love we see Jesus as THE SERVANT KING.

A SIGN OF HIS LOVE (VV. 2–11)

We'll come back to verse 2 and Judas next Sunday, Lord willing, but John reiterates verse 1 to say that **during supper...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, rose from supper (vv. 2, 3, 4). It was at that supper that Jesus performed A SIGN OF HIS LOVE.

He performed a sign of his love *in humbling himself*. **He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist** (v. 4). This doesn't mean much to us, but it means Jesus took the appearance of a servant. He would've been wearing a loincloth, like our underwear, and over that another body length garment. The one who was just acclaimed King by the crowds takes off the body length garment, strips down to his underwear, and tucks in a towel into his waist. In the clothing of a servant he performs the work of a servant: **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** (v. 5). In Jewish and Roman etiquette, this was a menial task reserved for the lowest servant to perform on guests in a house. Even more, according to some Jewish sources, it was understood that only Gentile servants should wash male Jewish feet; and if they were not available, then woman, children, or students.⁵ But never would a Jewish male washing another Jewish male's feet; never a teacher washing his disciples' feet! Jesus performed a revolutionary act of humbling himself as a sign of his loving them to the end of his life. Jesus embodied his own words: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45). Paul said

it memorably in his *Carmen Christi*, his song to Christ: “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” (Phil. 2:6–7).

He performed this sign of his love *in cleansing his disciples*. When **he came to Simon Peter** at the table, Peter **said to him, “Lord, do you wash my feet?”** (v. 6) We read of no one else speaking; perhaps they were stunned in silence at this revolutionary act. Think of the last time you saw something astonishing: your jaw literally was hanging down and you were silent. But then someone like Peter wasn’t at a loss for words! **Jesus simply answered him, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward** (meaning, after his death and resurrection) **you will understand”** (v. 7) **Peter**, though, still focused only on the outward action **said to Jesus, “You shall never wash my feet.”** So **Jesus answered him** again: **“If I do not wash you, you have no share with me”** (v. 8). Jesus is foreshadowing the cleansing of the cross of Calvary once for all. He’s saying only those washed belong to him (vv. 7, 9). In response **Peter**, still no doubt focused on the outward, **said...“Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”** (v. 9) We must learn that we can’t live eternally with Jesus apart from his cleansing. All of us need to take heart the

words of our centuries old baptismal form: “ baptism...teaches that sin has made us so impure that we must undergo a cleansing which only God can accomplish. By this we are admonished to detest ourselves, humble ourselves before God, and turn to Him for our cleansing and salvation.” “...only God can accomplish” this cleansing. That’s why we don’t baptize ourselves. If you’ve seen the movie *The Apostle*, there’s that scene where Robert Duvall’s character, The Apostle E.F., re-baptizes himself. Just as baptism is done *to us* so too is Jesus’ cleansing. In response to Peter, **Jesus said...“The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean...”** (v. 10) Again, we’ll return to Judas next week. Just as we must learn that we can’t live eternally with Jesus apart from his cleansing, we need to learn that not only does Jesus cleanse us once for all from the guilt of sin but that we still have need of a continual cleansing from the pollution of sin. What love from our SERVANT KING!

AN EXAMPLE FOR OUR LOVE (VV. 12–17)

I want you to write the following sentence down and fill in the blank: “Exposition must have ____.” What did you write? “Exposition must have *application*. Let’s do another: “Theology must become ____.” What did you write? “Theology must become *doxology*.” Let’s do one more: “Jesus’ love for

us must lead to ____.” What did you write? “Jesus’ love for us must lead to *our love for him.*” You should see a pattern here! We see that pattern here:

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? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. (vv. 12–14)

That verb **ought** is used of owing someone, so **ought** is strong; it means “must,” it means “being bound,” it means “be obligated.” Jesus commands AN EXAMPLE FOR OUR LOVE: **for I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you (v. 15).**

No doubt you’re asking yourselves, “What does this mean for us?” First off, foot washing is not a sacrament like baptism and communion because nowhere else in New Testament do we read of it in this way. Second, Jesus is speaking particularly to his disciples who are about to become his apostles. They’re going to spread the Gospel and be renowned as the foundation layers of the New Covenant church. They are to be humble as their Lord is humble. The application is not to re-create the scene in some ritual, but whoever we are in God’s kingdom, to serve with our hearts our brothers and sisters. Why? Because Jesus did. Turn to Philippians 2 for a moment to see how Paul applies Jesus’ humiliation:

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. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (vv. 1–4)

Then comes the reason:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 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. (vv. 5–7)

“Having the same love.” **Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.** “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” **He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist 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.** “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” **“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** (v. 16). How can you serve? We have things we already do, but what else can we do to show love?

What’s past is prologue. Jesus is our servant King! As those whom he loves, let us love and serve one another!

Notes

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 2, Scene 1.

² Carson, *John*, 455.

³ Carson, *John*, 461.

⁴ Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John 13:1–21:25*, 2.

⁵ Carson, *John*, 462.