

Thru the Bible Commentary
John 13:1-17

CHAPTER 13

THEME: *Jesus washes feet of disciples*

We come now to the fourth main division of this Gospel. We first studied the prologue, which was the first eighteen verses of chapter 1. Then we had the introduction, which was the remainder of the first chapter. We have seen the Witness of His Works and of His Words from chapters 2 to 12. Now we come to the Witness of Jesus to His Witnesses, chapters 13 to 17.

There is another way in which we could divide this Gospel. In the first twelve chapters the subject is *light*. They tell of His public ministry and that He is the Light. The division which we call the Upper Room Discourse is about the subject of *love*. He loves His own. The last part of the Gospel, from chapters 18 to 21, is about *life*. He came to bring us life, and that life is in Himself. Our life comes through His death.

The Lord Jesus gave four major discourses. Three of these have already been studied in the Gospel of Matthew: the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7); the Mystery Parables Discourse (Matt. 13), telling us about the Kingdom of Heaven; and the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24; 25). Now we come to the Upper Room Discourse which is recorded in John 13–17.

This discourse is one of the greatest that our Lord ever gave. It is the longest, and it is meaningful for us today because He took His own into the Upper Room and revealed new truths to them. It is still brand new and fresh for us today. There is nothing quite like it. His public ministry has ended, and He has been rejected. Now He talks about His love for us, how we are to live the Christian life, of the provision He has made for us, and of the relationships between Him and those who are His own. As He is on His way to the Cross, He has no message for the Pharisees or the religious rulers or the Roman government. This message is for His own.

JESUS WASHES FEET OF DISCIPLES

We come now to a most unusual incident. I wish I could shock you, startle you with it. We hear it so often that we lose the wonder of it. Jesus Christ leaves heaven's glory and comes down to this earth and He takes the place of a slave and washes feet!

In the preceding chapter, you will remember, we saw that the feet of Jesus were anointed. Here, the feet of the disciples are washed. What a difference! As the Savior passed through this sinful world, He contacted no defilement whatsoever. He was holy, harmless, and undefiled. The feet speak of the walk of a person, and the anointing of Jesus' feet with spikenard tells of the sweet savor of the walk of our Lord.

The disciples' feet needed washing! Jesus washed their feet with water, not with blood. That is important to see. I hear many people talking about coming anew to the fountain filled with blood and being cleansed. This dishonors our Lord. The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin—past, present, and future—in one application. There is only one sacrifice. "For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified" (Heb. 10:14). When you and I came as sinners to Christ Jesus, it was His shed blood that

once and for all cleansed us and gave us a standing before God. But, my friend, we need to be purified along the pilgrim pathway; in our walk through the world we get dirty, and we need washing. We shall see that our Lord washed His disciples' feet for this very definite purpose.

There is a threefold reason given to explain why He washed their feet, and we shall note this as we read.

Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end.

And supper being ended, the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him [John 13:1–2].

Jesus washed their feet because He knew that He would "depart out of this world." His ministry would continue after He went back to heaven. He has identified Himself with His people, and today He still washes the feet of His disciples. He says that He will depart out of this "world" (*kosmos*), meaning the world system. It is man's world, a world of sin. It is a civilization that is anti-God and anti-Christ, and it is under judgment. Because He is leaving this world, He washes their feet.

The second reason He does this is that He loved His own. He loved them "unto the end." He is going to the Father because He loved His own. He died to save His own, and He lives to keep them saved. We have a wonderful Savior, and He loves us right on through to the very end. God loves us with an everlasting love; we cannot keep Him from loving us.

The third reason is that another person had entered into the room. There was an uninvited guest present. His name was Satan. We speak of thirteen persons in the Upper Room, but actually, there were fourteen because Satan was there. Satan put into the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray Him. Wherever the Devil gets into Christian work, others are affected and the Lord must wash them. He must wash us if we are to have fellowship with Him.

Notice that this took place at the Feast of the Passover. "Supper being ended" is literally "supper being in progress." This is not the Lord's Supper. Actually John does not even record the Lord's Supper. Why does John omit something so important? I think it is because at the time John wrote, there were already Christians who were making a ritual out of the Lord's Supper. There is a great danger in putting importance on a ritual rather than on the person Jesus Christ. It is more important to know the Word of God than it is to partake of Communion. There is no blessing in Communion apart from a knowledge of the Word of God. An apologetics professor, whom I had, said that it was Christ in your heart and bread in your tummy. The bread in your tummy won't be there long; Christ in your heart is the essential. I believe that is why John omits telling about the Lord's Supper.

Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God, and went to God [John 13:3].

A better translation would be, "Since Jesus knew that the Father had given all things into His hands, that He was come from God, and that He is going to God." It is restated that what He is doing is because He is returning to the Father. That is important.

He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself.

After that he poureth water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded [John 13:4-5].

He lays aside His outer garment; that is, He takes off the robe that He is wearing. Then He takes a linen cloth, and He girds Himself with it. This is such a strange thing which He does. He takes the place of a servant. He is girded with the towel of service, and He is ready to wash their feet.

In studying Exodus 21, we learn of a law regarding slaves. A Hebrew slave served his master six years, and he could go free on the seventh year. If, during that time, he had taken a wife and had had children, the master would free him but not his family. However, the slave could choose to stay. If he loved his master and his family, he could stay with them. Then the master would back him up to a door post and bore his ear with an awl which would identify him as a voluntary slave forever. Although he could have gone out free, he stayed because of love. Our Lord Jesus came down to this earth, took upon Himself our humanity, and was made in the likeness of a servant. He did all this because He loved us. He could have gone out free, but He died on the Cross to provide salvation for us. He did this to establish a wonderful relationship for us and to make it possible for us to have fellowship with Him. He has become a slave because He loves us.

Then cometh he to Simon Peter: and Peter saith unto him, Lord, dost thou wash my feet?

Jesus answered and said unto him, What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter [John 13:6-7].

Some people say that this is a sacrament and that we should practice foot washing. I see nothing wrong with practicing this if the spiritual meaning is not lost. Others say that this is a lesson in humility and is an example to us. There is nothing wrong with that interpretation, but I do not think it goes deep enough. Peter certainly could see this was an example of humility; yet the Lord said, "What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter."

Peter saith unto him, Thou shalt never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me [John 13:8].

What did our Lord mean by that? He meant that without this washing there can be no fellowship with Him. This is the Passover Feast which speaks of His death. He arose from the Passover Feast which speaks of His rising in resurrection and going back to heaven. He is girded with the towel of service and He is saying to us, "If I don't wash you, you'll have no part with me." You cannot have fellowship with him, service with Him, without the washing. How does Christ wash us today? "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word" (Ps. 119:9). "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you" (John 15:3). "... even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word" (Eph. 5:25-26). It is the Word of God that will keep the believer clean. And when we sin, how are we cleansed? "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Too many people treat sin as a light matter. My friend, may I say to you, the feet speak of the walk, and when you and I become disobedient, we are not walking in His way. That is sin, and that needs to be confessed.

Simon Peter saith unto him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head [John 13:9].

He at first pulls his feet up; then when our Lord says he won't have fellowship with Him, he sticks out his feet—big old fisherman's feet—and he holds out his hands—and they have been strong, calloused hands—and he even held down his head, and said, “not just my feet, but also wash my hands, wash my head.” If it means fellowship, Peter wants all he can get of that.

Jesus saith to him, He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all [John 13:10].

Now He says, “He that's washed needeth not to be washed.” That doesn't make good sense, does it? The reason it doesn't is that He used two different words and, unfortunately, the translators didn't make the distinction (nor do our more recent translations make the distinction), but they are absolutely two different words. He says, “... He that is *louo*.” *Louo* means “bathed.” *Nipto* is the word translated “wash.” “He that is bathed needeth not except to wash his feet.”

In those days they went to the public bath for their bathing. Then a man would put on his sandals to come home. In his home was a basin of water for him to wash his feet because they had gotten dirty walking through the streets of the city. Not only was there dirt, but in those days the garbage was thrown into the streets. So even though he had just come from a bath, he had to wash his feet when he entered the house.

Our Lord is teaching that when we came to the Cross, when we came to Jesus, we were washed all over. That is the bath, *louo*, regeneration. When we walk through this world, we are defiled and get dirty. We become disobedient, and sin gets into our lives. I do not believe that any believer goes through a day without getting just a little dirty. He says that we cannot have fellowship with Him if we are dirty. So the washing of the feet, *nipto*, is the cleansing in order to restore us to fellowship. “If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us [keeps on cleaning us] from all sin” (1 John 1:6–7).

Friend, in order to have our feet washed we must first confess our sin. To confess means to agree with God. It means to say the same thing that God says about our sin. One of the hardest things in the world is to get a saint to admit he is a sinner. Coldness, indifference, lack of love, all are seen by God as sin. If we confess, He is faithful and just to forgive. But that is not all. If you are going to have your feet washed, you must put them into the hands of the Savior. That is obedience. We can't just say, “God forgive me, I did wrong,” and then go out and do the same thing all over again. That's not getting your feet into the hands of the Savior.

For he knew who should betray him; therefore said he, Ye are not all clean [John 13:11].

Jesus knew that Judas would betray Him. He knew that Judas had not taken a bath. In other words, Judas had never been regenerated. That is why He said they were not all clean.

So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you?

Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am.

If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet.

For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.

Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him.

If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them [John 13:12–17].

If you want joy in your life today, Christian friend, go to Him and confess. This is one of the problems in our Christian congregations today. We may have our heads full of doctrine, but our feet smell. Brother, there is nothing that smells as bad as unwashed feet! Maybe that is the reason some of our services don't smell so good. That is the reason we don't reach more people for Christ. We need to confess in order to have fellowship with Christ.

Jesus said that as He had washed their feet, so they were to wash one another's feet. What does that mean? Paul tells us in Galatians how we are to do that. "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted" (Gal. 6:1). That is, when a brother in Christ falls into sin, he is to be brought back into fellowship by one who is spiritual. Beating him on the head and criticizing him is not washing his feet, friend. To restore him means to wash his feet. In the church we have all sorts of talent—excellent speakers and beautiful music—but there is no revival. We need foot washing; we need to be cleansed. Before we can wash the feet of a brother, we need first to have the Lord of glory wash our feet. We should come to Him every time that we are dirty and be cleansed by Him.

The psalmist says, "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139:23–24). There is not a one of us who goes through a day without some sin. We need to confess that to the Lord and be cleansed. We are washed by the Word of God. We put our feet into His hands, which means that we are completely yielded to Him. This places us in fellowship with the Lord Jesus. Friend, don't let a single day go by without this fellowship. Don't let sin come in to break this fellowship with Him.

The disciples were like a group of children in that Upper Room. They were frightened, and rightly so. The shadow of the Cross had fallen upon that little group¹

¹ J. Vernon McGee, [*Thru the Bible Commentary: The Gospels \(John 11-21\)*](#), electronic ed., vol. 39 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 55–62.