

## **The Gospel of John**

### **Session Twenty-Nine: Jesus's Teaching at the Last Supper, Part 1**

#### **Commentary**

#### **John 13:31-35**

13:31–32. Once Judas had left, his evil presence removed from the room, the Lord could speak to the remaining eleven about his glorification. We sing, “In the Cross of Christ I Glory.” This hymn may have its foundation in these verses. The horror of Roman execution glorified the Son of God and glorified the Father. Having been glorified, the Father glorified the Son with resurrection and ascension. That is why Jesus could pray in chapter 17, “Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you” (17:1).

Once again the Lord identified himself as the Son of Man. According to Westcott, “This title ... is the key to the interpretation of the passage. The words are spoken of as a relation of ‘the Son of Man’ to ‘God,’ and not of that of ‘the Son’ to ‘the Father’ ” (Westcott, p. 196). The phrase appears twelve times in John’s Gospel and this is the last (1:51; 3:13–14; 5:27; 6:27, 53, 62; 8:28; 9:35; 12:23, 34; 13:31).

We have already studied the significance of glory (doxa) in its various forms. In these verses John seemed to multiply its use deliberately. Tenney reminds us, “In this concept the Cross and the Resurrection are united as phases of a single redemptive event by which the purpose of God is completed and his righteousness vindicated” (Tenney, Merrill C. *The Gospel of John. Expositor’s Bible Commentary*. Vol. 9. Ed. by Frank E. Gaebelin. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981, p. 141).

13:33–35. The words where I am going, you cannot come offer the only saying in John that appears three times with the same wording (7:33; 8:21). Imagine the confusion of the disciples at this point. They did not have the luxury of knowing the opening verses of chapter 14. They could only ponder what the Lord meant until he continued his teaching with further explanation.

Love extended leads to discipleship and denial and perhaps even to death. But the sacrifice itself should not be the focus for the disciples, but the motive behind it. These verses lay a strong groundwork for John’s three epistles. This is a new commandment and a new object. Not just “love God” or “love me,” but love one another.

In 1 John this theme of loving one another appears in 2:9–10; 3:11–18; 4:7–12, 19–21; and 5:1–3. It was not only a new commandment and a new object, but a new mode (as I have loved you) and, perhaps most difficult and shocking of all, a new judge. Verse 35 can be identified as the key verse of this chapter. God allows the world to judge whether people are truly Jesus’ disciples by the way they behave toward one another. Sadly, the church has not done very well on this point. Perhaps this accounts for some of the struggles the gospel has had for almost two thousand years.

In the 1960s when Christian folk music was becoming popular, we often sang a song that repeated the phrase, “and they’ll know we are Christians by our love.” Not by the size of our buildings. Not by the frequency of our attendance. Not by the multiplicity of religious duties we observe. Not by the ostentation of our public worship. As Morgan puts it, “The measure in which Christian people fail in love to each other is the measure in which the world does not believe in them, or their Christianity. It is the final test of discipleship, according to Jesus” (Morgan, G. Campbell. *The Crises of the Christ*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1903, p. 241).

### **John 14:1-14**

14:1. Troubled people need peace and affirmation. The problems of the disciples were as real as our problems. In fact, it is probably fair to say that most Christians are realists. From Scripture they recognize the reality of sin, the reality of evil in the world, the reality of deliverance from sin, and the reality of ultimate eternal life.

These disciples, good Jews, had already trusted in God and now Jesus asked them to trust in him. They had watched him feed five thousand people and bring Lazarus back from the dead, but now they must trust him not just for food or miracles, but with their lives.

Some question exists about the grammatical nature of the verbs rendered trust in this verse. The NIV offers the preferred translation with the verbs appearing in what Greek scholars would call an imperative/imperative pattern. Rather than saying, “You have trusted in God so now trust in me,” or some similar phrase, both sections of the sentence offer a command.

14:2. Let us acknowledge at the beginning of this chapter that this portion of Scripture is not about huge buildings in heaven but about space. Lots of songs have been written to proclaim “mansions over the hilltop,” but Jesus simply told his disciples, “There’s room in heaven for you.”

But he also wanted to indicate that he would go ahead of them to do specific work—the preparation of heaven (14:2b). The New Testament teaches us we are pilgrims and wanderers in this world. We may own homes, and some of them may be huge and beautiful. But we do not belong here because we are not primarily citizens of this world. In heaven we will be where we really belong because Jesus has gone ahead to prepare a place for us.

Paul Tournier once suggested that a place of one’s own has been the basic desire of every heart since Eden. Let us not think of this preparation as the Lord’s return to his carpentry skills, pounding two-by-fours in a housing project for believers. It surely describes his death, resurrection, ascension, and princely role at the Father’s right hand.

The promise “I will come back” (v. 3) has been variously understood by interpreters. But in the context of death, ascension, and heaven, it seems difficult to arrive at any conclusion other than the second coming of Jesus. As to the Father’s house, I agree with Carson: “The simplest explanation is best: my Father’s house refers to heaven, and in heaven are many rooms, many

dwelling-places. The point is not the lavishness of each apartment, but the fact that such ample provision has been made, that there is more than enough space for every one of Jesus' disciples to join him in his Father's home. Besides, have they not just been encouraged to trust him (v. 1), and always found strong reason to do so? Can they not therefore be assured that if heaven were other than what he has described, he would have told them?" (Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991, p. 489).

14:3–4. Forget the mansions; what this passage talks about is the personal touch of the Savior. Count the times he says I or me in these two short verses, and you will come up with five. He wanted the disciples to trust him personally. It was not just preparation of a place in focus here, but the personal return of Jesus to take his own to heaven. This passage does not speak about levels of reward or big buildings in heaven. It promises the second coming of Jesus Christ. Did they really know the way? They should have known; it has been obvious in this book since chapter 3.

The setting of these verses centers on promise and peace. Jesus would take care of his disciples by making sure they could be with him in the Father's presence. By this point in his ministry, they were expected to know the way to the place where I am going. Of the coming and going in this passage Westcott writes, "This departure is itself the condition of the return: separation, the cessation of the present circumstances of fellowship, was the first step toward complete union" (Westcott, B. F. *The Gospel According to John*. London: James Clarke & Co., Ltd., 1958, p. 201).

14:5–7. Thomas was an honest follower though always the skeptic, so he was the first to ask, Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way? Jesus' response is the key verse of the passage, memorized by Christians all around the globe. Jesus is the way—reconciliation; Jesus is the truth—illumination; Jesus is the life—regeneration. This is the exclusive gospel. The New Testament knows nothing of universalism—the idea that God will find some way to save everybody. What could be clearer than Jesus' words in verse 6, No one comes to the Father except through me.

Why did the disciples need all this talk about trusting Jesus? Why do we need it? Because like them, we do not know Jesus well enough; so we struggle to understand the Father. Repeatedly Jesus emphasized the link between the heavenly Father and the Son, but right up to the end the disciples did not get it—and we struggle with the concept as well.

This is one of those places at which we would like to have audio aids for the Bible. What was Thomas's tone of voice when he said this? Is he still the skeptic? The pessimist? The negative thinker? It would appear so, but we admire his openness and vulnerability. The impact of Jesus' answer echoes through the centuries to the present hour. He embodies the way to God, the truth about God, and the life in God. And if the disciples really knew him as they should, they would understand the inseparability between the Father and the Son.

This announcement in John 14:6 prepares the way for the author of Hebrews to write, “We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body” (Heb. 10:19–20).

14:8–11. Philip either did not understand his Old Testament well or he failed to link the Father and the Son. Or perhaps he was born in Missouri, the “show me” state. If Jesus could produce physical evidence of the Father, Philip claimed the disciples would finally be satisfied.

We must remember Jesus’ response. There is no difference between the Father and the Son; they are both God—equally powerful. Here again we find the theme “believing is seeing” that surfaced so clearly in 11:40. Notice Jesus’ emphasis on both words and work in verse 10. Jesus’ words reflected his deity much more than his work did. The disciples had been fascinated by his work, but they had not listened carefully enough to his words. Almost in frustration, the Lord said, at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves.

What is God like? I once heard a sermon on this topic. The pastor talked on and on about God being like flowers, sunsets, the cry of a newborn baby, the beauty of a clear blue sky. Certainly, all those are part of God’s natural revelation and therefore reflect him. But he never got to the bottom line: God is like Jesus Christ.

In actuality, Philip’s confusion is typical of the disciples throughout the first four books of the New Testament. The depth of theology in these discussions overwhelmed the disciples, probably until the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Even Christians today who hold the entire Bible and enjoy the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit struggle with the doctrine of the Trinity and oneness of the Father and the Son.

Tenney’s point is instructive: “Furthermore, if a personality must be employed to represent God, that personality cannot be less than God and do him justice, nor can it be so far above humanity that it cannot communicate God perfectly to men. For this reason John says that ‘the only Son, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known’ (John 1:18). The way Jesus made known the character and reality of the Father was by his words and works. The truth of God filled Jesus’ words; the power of God produced his works” (Tenney, EBC, p. 145).

14:12. This is one of the most interesting verses in the Bible. Interpreters have pondered what Jesus meant by telling his disciples that they would do greater things than he, the Son of God, had done. But perhaps the best way to understand the verse is to take it literally, exactly as Jesus said it. Jesus’ earthly ministry was limited in time and space. He served the Father for three and one-half years and never outside the boundaries of Palestine. The disciples, on the other hand, as Acts clearly attests, carried out ministry that was greater geographically, in terms of numbers of people reached and long-lasting effect.

We find a leadership principle here as well. All parents should be able to say to their children; all pastors should be able to say to their staffs; all leaders should be able to say to their followers: “You have the potential to do greater things than I have done.” To empower and

develop followers whose ministry exceeds the impact of their mentors is to follow the model of Jesus.

14:13. In this verse we find one of the great prayer promises of the Bible that focuses first on the purpose of prayer. Jesus answers prayer in order to bring glory to the Father. Our praying, therefore, ought to be directed toward that goal and end. But we have to pause at the dramatic implications of words like whatever you ask and “ask me for anything” (v. 14).

Perhaps a word of caution is in order here. No theology should be built from a single verse or even a handful of verses in the Bible. The Bible contains huge blocks of information on prayer, and this is one of them. Jesus had already taught the disciples much about prayer, and here we have only a final reminder, not everything that applies to the subject. Nevertheless, this promise of prayer we cannot ignore. In fact, what we see here is a New Testament formula of asking in the name of Jesus, something new to the disciples though they would hear it again before Jesus finished his teaching.

Notice the similarity between this teaching and chapter 16: “In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete” (John 16:23–24).

14:14. Obviously, just saying “in Jesus’ name” creates no magic potion for prayer. The culture in which these words were spoken took names very seriously, so much so that they equated one’s name with the character, spirit, and power of that person. That is why the Jews never spoke the name of Yahweh.

Imagine a child playing in the middle of the street when her father arrives home from work. When he scolds her and calls her back to the yard immediately, she says, “Mommy told me I could play in the street; I’m out here in mommy’s name.” A ridiculous illustration, but it points out how often Christians do strange things and then claim they are behaving “in Jesus’ name.” Since Jesus’ name is always connected in some way with our prayers even if we do not speak those words, if we cannot ask in his name we should not ask at all.

Tasker reminds us that Jesus, “departure to the Father, so far from ending his influence on earth, will mean its continuance under wider conditions and with the results rendered possible by the power of effective prayer” (Tasker, R. V. G. *The Gospel According to Saint John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960, p. 166).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gangel, Kenneth O. *Holman New Testament Commentary: John*. Edited by Max E. Anders. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2000).