

The Gospel of John

Session Twenty-Eight: The Last Supper and Jesus's Farewell Discourse Commentary

John 13:1-30

13:1. We have talked often about key words in John's Gospel. The thirteenth chapter opens with three of them appearing in the first verse. The time had come, and Jesus would soon leave this world. The word *kosmos* appears 185 times in the New Testament; 8 times in Matthew; 3 times in Mark, 3 in Luke; but 78 in the Gospel of John. And if we add John's epistles and Revelation, 105 of the 185 New Testament uses come from John's pen. The other two key words are time and love. We take our title from the latter part of this verse where full extent translates the Greek word *eis telos* that means "to the limit."

Some interpreters have noted a change in John's vocabulary beginning with this chapter. The life and light words that dominated the first half of the Gospel appear in some form a total of 82 times in chapters 1 through 12. But in chapters 13 to 17, life words occur only six times and light words not at all. The key word for the next five chapters will be *agape* (love).

13:2. Judas typifies a society in rebellion against God, but the Lord's treatment also demonstrates God's grace and compassion with that society. Though the disciples never grasped Judas' true nature until after the betrayal in the garden, Jesus knew it from the beginning. Yet he gave Judas every opportunity to turn from his wicked ways, repent, and follow his Lord.

John pulled no punches in his description of the betrayer and his evil master. In a few more verses (v. 27) we read that "Satan entered into him." But even at the beginning of the meal the concept of betrayal had already been thrown (*ballo*) into Judas's mind. There is some grammatical argument over the text, but the plain intent indicates a willing perpetrator whose assassination plot originated with supernatural sources.

13:3–5. Verse 3 reminds us that Jesus was the omnipotent God. Rather than zapping Judas immediately, he allowed the full scenario to play out as the errant disciple made choice after choice leading to his ultimate suicide.

Some interpreters take these words symbolically, making the water equal to the Word, the towel demonstrating righteousness, and so forth. That hardly seems necessary in light of the culture of the first century. Luke 22 tells us about this event of physical humbling in light of the arrogant attitude still maintained by the disciples after the night of the crucifixion. An old proverb says, "Actions speak louder than words," and the Lord's willingness to wash the feet of his disciples, even Judas's, reflects servant leadership at its best.

People who are familiar with first-century culture will immediately recognize how socially inappropriate this behavior was. Never in Jewish, Greek, or Roman society would a superior wash the feet of inferiors. As Carson observes, "The reluctance of Jesus' disciples to volunteer

for such a task is, to say the least, culturally understandable; their shock at his volunteering is not merely the result of being shame-faced, it is their response to finding their sense of the fitness of things shattered. But here Jesus reverses normal roles. His act of humility is as unnecessary as it is stunning, and is simultaneously a display of love (v. 1), a symbol of saving cleansing (vv. 6–9), and a model of Christian conduct (vv. 12–17)” (Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991, pp. 462–63).

In the brilliant kenosis passage of Philippians 2, we read about the condescension of Christ “who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Phil. 2:6–7). The Philippians passage speaks about the human nature of the Savior, but here we see it in action.

13:6–7. Little discussions with Peter fill the synoptic Gospels, and John enjoys recording them as well. Shocked by the cultural reversal as he literally looked down at his Lord, Peter said in effect, “What’s going on here?” And Jesus replied, “You have no idea, but some day you will.” Presumably Jesus began the foot-washing with Peter, so he was the first to be shocked. Tasker picks up on the meaning of the moment: “Peter resists the attempt of Jesus to wash his feet, precisely because he failed to associate what his Master was doing with His death, but regarded it merely as an act which any slave might perform before a banquet. In making this protest Peter was in fact displaying the pride of unredeemed men and women, who are so confident of their ability to save themselves that they instinctively resist the suggestion that they need divine cleansing” (Tasker, R. V. G. *The Gospel According to Saint John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960, p. 155).

13:8–9. Peter was too humble to have his feet washed but not too humble to command the Lord. As soon as Jesus emphasized that this symbolic act united the disciple with the Lord in some significant way, Peter took the full plunge. Let us not miss the practical theology of these verses. There is no place in the body of Christ for those who have not been cleansed by the Lord. Washing in this symbolic context cannot refer to baptism, but the atoning cleansing of sin.

13:10–11. Here we have a beautiful picture of forgiveness and one of the most important theological texts of the New Testament. How often does a person need to be saved? Once? Every time he or she sins? Just before death to make sure? These verses tell us that a person who has been completely cleansed once will only require regular washings after that.

The first verb (*louo*) appears in the perfect tense, indicating completed action, obviously union with the Lord through salvation. The second (*nipto*), rendered wash, means precisely the kind of rinsing Jesus demonstrated on this occasion. A full bathing depicts initial regeneration; the repeated washings symbolize forgiveness of ongoing sinful behavior.

This is not the only interpretation of the text. “Roman Catholics sometimes have interpreted verse 10 to mean that after infant baptism only penance is needed. A preferable interpretation emphasizes that after salvation all one needs is confession of sins, the continual application of

Jesus' death to cleanse one's daily sins" (Blum, Edwin A. "John." *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. Ed. by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1983, p. 320). Here are a few sample "one-liners" on this key text:

"He who is bathed needs, so to speak, only to remove the stains contracted in the walk of life; just as the guest, after the bath, needs only to have the dust washed from his feet when he reaches the house of his host" (Westcott, B. F. *The Gospel According to John*. London: James Clarke & Co., Ltd., 1958, pp. 191–92).

"Individuals who have been cleansed by Christ's atoning work will doubtless need to have subsequent sins washed away, but the fundamental cleansing can never be repeated" (Carson, p. 465).

"Those who are Christ's are totally justified men and women, but they do need constant cleansing from their repeated defilement by sin in order that the fellowship they have with the Father and with the Son might not be broken" (Boice, James M. *The Gospel of John* (5 vols.). Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977, IV, p. 32).

13:12–14. The washing not only demonstrated humility and servanthood to the disciples but also laid an experiential foundation for the teaching of verse 10. When the foot-washing ended, Jesus taught an important lesson about the relationship of believers—you also should wash one another's feet.

As Mother Teresa has shown us, perhaps more than anyone else in the twentieth century, if our teacher and Lord does not hesitate to wash our feet, how can we fail to wash one another's feet? Certainly there can be no harm in the literal practice of foot-washing, but the symbolism of first-century behavior seems more appropriately replicated in the way we serve people in a variety of ways.

Incidentally, the only other reference to foot-washing appears in 1 Timothy 5:10, so we have scant evidence that the New Testament church actually practiced this as a regular ordinance. Jesus emphasized the words Teacher and Lord in contrast with the way they had behaved toward him. The Lord reminded them that he washed their feet as their leader. Morris says, "Jesus proceeds to endorse this way of speaking. He commends the disciples, for these expressions point to his true position. But precisely because of this there are implications. His repetition of 'the Lord and the teacher' (a reversed order may be significant) emphasizes his dignity. This exalted Person has washed their feet. They ought, therefore, to wash one another's feet" (Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, p. 620).

13:15–17. Throughout the New Testament we learn the importance of example, never more so than when Jesus refers to himself. But here we are not focused on some great spiritual reality or doctrinal truth; the passage deals with how we treat other people. As Francis Schaeffer often

observed, love is the ultimate mark of the Christian. Since Jesus loved his disciples and loves us in the same way, we need to do for others what he has done for us.

In verse 16 we find John's only use of the word *apostolos*, the common New Testament word for "apostle," here translated as messenger. Interesting that no church office or spiritual gift comes to view here. The context remains one of foot-washing as an example of how Christians treat one another. If we would be Christ's messengers in any capacity, we must behave toward others the way he behaved toward his disciples.

We receive God's joy by acting on the principles of conduct that Jesus taught. First we ought to pray, "Lord, wash me"; then we need to pray, "Lord, help me wash others." And let us not forget that the word blessed can also be translated "happy." We can be happy as Christians by acting on the principles of these verses, conducting our lives in such a way that we forgive, serve, and love the brothers and sisters in Christ. When we avoid criticism, complaining, and conflict, harmony and unity gain strength in the body.

Hughes calls this kind of behavior, "'people of the towel': When Jesus said, 'Do you know what I have done to you?' he might have added, 'and do you know who you are, as heirs to the towel?' The power, the impetus, and the grace to wash one another's feet is proportionate to how we see ourselves. Our Lord saw Himself as King of kings, and He washed their feet. Recovery of a consciousness that we serve Christ the King will also compel us to service" (Hughes. *Behold the Man* (2 vols.). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1984, p. 38).

13:18. We must see the remainder of chapter 13 in the light of the first seventeen verses which showed Jesus' intimacy with his friends. When we remember verse 14, "now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet," we can link it with the key verse of the second part of the chapter: "all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (v. 35).

Verse 18 stands in stark contrast to the verse immediately preceding it. Jesus had just said, "now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them" (v. 17). Now he changed the mood dramatically with a frightening caveat: I am not referring to all of you. One of the Twelve was not among the chosen. Of him Jesus quoted Psalm 41:9: "Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me." This fulfilled prophecy showed the messianic deity of the Savior.

The words lifted up his heel suggest the kick of a mule, a phrase that reminds me of something that happened to our family some years ago. I was speaking at a Bible conference in Canada. During the week we went on a group trail ride. When we returned and dismounted, our five-year-old daughter wanted to give her horse a pat on the back. As she approached it from the rear, the horse kicked her, knocking her backward in an explosion of fears and tears. She was just bruised a bit, but she learned at a very early age never to approach a horse or mule from the rear. That shocking kick describes what Judas did, and Jesus predicted it without labeling the betrayer.

13:19–20. The fact of fulfilled prophecy takes center stage again in verse 19. Jesus not only quoted a prophetic psalm but immediately offered a prophecy himself—a prophecy intended to produce greater faith. He claimed equality with God (I am He) on the basis that one of their group would betray him. They knew it ahead of time and should have remembered at that moment that the Son of God predicted it. Then he went on to tell them that they represented him so closely that anyone who accepted a person who came in Jesus' name with Jesus' message accepted the presence of Jesus himself.

Carson says, "This verse powerfully ties the disciples to Jesus, and therefore serves as a foil for the failure of Judas Iscariot. The mission of Jesus is here assigned the highest theological significance, the most absolutely binding authority—the authority of God himself. Failure to close with Christ is failure to know God. And because his disciples re-present him to the world, their mission, their ministry, takes on precisely the same absolute significance" (Carson, p. 471).

13:21. This was not an easy conversation. In this verse John reminded us of two different occasions in chapter 11. First, the Lord wanted to be sure the disciples grasped the meaning of the quote from Psalm 41:9 so he said plainly, one of you is going to betray me. Second, we find here the same word that we have seen in 11:33 and 12:27, translated troubled in each case. Once again, I tell you the truth translates the familiar amen, amen.

13:22–26. The disciples' ignorance indicated how easy it was for Judas to disguise his motives and his purpose. Peter had to ask John to request further identification. Even when the Lord specifically said, It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread, the disciples still had no idea what was going on.

It is helpful here to look at a similar account of the same event in Matthew's Gospel: "They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, 'Surely not I, Lord?' Jesus replied, 'The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.' Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, 'Surely not I, Rabbi?' Jesus answered, 'Yes, it is you'" (Matt. 26:22–25).

The comparison of Matthew with the John passage might suggest that only Judas heard the answer, but it is certainly clear that the disciple band trusted their treasurer and had no idea what would happen. We cannot identify Christ's elect by outward appearance. Even a person who seems to be close to the Lord may be lost.

Did Jesus' offer of the bread constitute a last opportunity for Judas to repent? Some argue that point. Blum writes, "Giving the morsel to Judas was an uncaught sign of recognition to John, but it was also the Lord's final extension of grace to Judas. Hosts giving a morsel of bread to a guest was a sign of friendship. How ironic that Jesus' act of friendship to Judas signaled Judas' betrayal of friendship" (Blum, p. 321).

13:27–30. Here we find the only mention of Satan in John’s Gospel. We must remember that John wrote this account many years later, so he casually described Judas’ departure, having already told us in 12:6 that Judas was a thief who helped himself to the treasury.

As far as the disciples knew, Judas was a follower of Jesus, as strong in his commitment as any of them. That is one reason why Jesus warned in Matthew 13 that we should be careful about trying to point out the difference between the wheat and the weeds.

As Judas exchanged Christ’s tenderness for the terror of that awful night, love’s appeal became hate’s dynamic: and it was night. Our chapter began in the evening. John wanted us to know that the sun had long gone and the Son would soon be gone as well. Judas had begun, and now continued, as Eugene O’Neill once put it, “a long day’s journey into night.”¹

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