“YOU ALSO SHOULD WASH ONE ANOTHER’S FEET”

John 13:1–17

Key Verse: 13:14

“Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet.”

If you knew you were about to die, what’s the one thing you’d say to the people you love? Some might say, “Watch your money!” or, “Don’t trust people!” Some would say, “Do something useful!” or, “Live with no regrets!” or “Do you!” Being diligent, not wasting time or opportunities, working hard—these are all really good ways of living. But what’s the main thing Jesus told his disciples? Basically he said, “Truly love me, and love one another.” He repeats it several times. At its core, Christian life isn’t about rules or activities; it’s all about love.

John 13–16 are known as the Upper Room dialogues. They are Jesus’ intimate conversations with his disciples just before his arrest and crucifixion. For Christians down through the centuries they’ve been some of the most loved words in the Bible. And these words of our Lord Jesus are found nowhere else except in John’s Gospel. Basically, in these four chapters Jesus is preparing his disciples for life without his human presence anymore.

Today we’ll be studying the first half of chapter 13. It’s very interesting that before *teaching* his disciples anything, Jesus first *does* something for them. He washes their feet. At first, to us, it may seem like no big deal. But to *them*, it was shocking, and it left a huge impression. Why did he do it? Jesus wanted them to learn how to both receive and give love. In this study we especially want to think about the nature of Jesus’ love, how we can experience and practice it, and why this is most important. May God speak to us personally through his word today.

Read verse 1. Here John first stresses the importance of the time setting: “It was just before the Passover Festival” (1a). John has been mentioning the fast approach of this event in the past two chapters (11:55; 12:1); now, the week-long event was about to get started, with a meal. He also says here that “the hour had come.” It’s another important repeated theme in John’s Gospel. John has been mentioning Jesus’ time or hour (2:4; 7:6,8,30; 8:20) and that this time is “coming” (4:21,23; 5:25,28; 7:39). In 12:23 Jesus said, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” What was this “time” or “hour”? It was the time when Jesus would be “lifted up,” when he would become “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29; 3:14; 8:28; 12:32,34). Basically, it was when Jesus would die on a cross.

But here in verse 1 John puts it another way. He says “the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father.” If we think about it, crucifixion is a brutal way to end one’s life—so painful and humiliating. But Jesus saw it not as an end but as the path to a beginning. After his crucifixion he would be going back to God the Father through his resurrection. We all would like to think we know where our lives are headed. But actually we don’t ever really know. Our lives on earth could last many more years, or they could be over way sooner than we thought. Near the point of death, expected or sudden, many are unprepared. Some get really terrified; some despair. But Jesus could see the bigger picture, through the eyes of faith, that he was about to return to his Father God.

At the end of life what was on Jesus’ mind? Verse 1b mentions “his own,” meaning his disciples. Jesus loved all people, even his enemies, but he especially loved his disciples. Why? It says here that they were “his own.” Later he says they belonged to the Father, and that the Father had given them to him (17:6,9,10). What made his disciples different? Jesus said it was that they accepted God’s words, and based on those words, they believed in him (17:8; cf. 6:68,69). They were the sheep Jesus mentioned earlier who know the voice of their shepherd and follow him (10:3,4,27). It also says here, “Having loved his own who were in the world…” From the beginning, when he first called them, Jesus loved his disciples. He saw them with hope. He invested his life spending time with them, teaching them and sharing his heart. Now, facing his own death, it says, “…he loved them to the end.” When we’re in a bad situation it’s so easy to think only about ourselves. But Jesus wasn’t thinking about himself at all; all his focus was on his disciples. It shows us that his love is selfless. His love is also faithful. Human love is so changeable. We love when we feel good. If we’re just a little bit hungry, we can become cross with the people we really should be loving. But Jesus was loving his disciples even when they were clueless and he was facing death on a cross.

In verse 1 Jesus mainly focused his last hours on showing his disciples his love. Actually, the time he spent with them and the words he gave them were all forms of his love. What he was about to do for them was especially an expression of his great love. Why did Jesus focus so much on showing his disciples his love to the end? Love is a big problem for most people. We may think children need love, but not adults; adults are self-sufficient, right? But we human beings all need love. Our lives get into all kinds of trouble when we don’t feel loved. It’s so hard to really trust somebody’s love, and so easy to doubt it. Doubt of God’s love was what led Adam and Eve to sin in the first place (Ge3). When we’re not sure of God’s love, we feel insecure and unstable. But if we’re sure of God’s love, we can face anything in this world (Ro8:37–39). We may have many ideas about raising disciples—teaching and training people in various ways. But Jesus focused on showing his disciples his love to the end.

Look at verse 2. It was the Last Supper. They were sharing this precious time together, Jesus and his disciples. But there was an impending tragedy among them—one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, was about to betray him. John says “the devil…prompted” him. To betray the love of a wonderful person can be conceived only with the devil’s prompting. The devil is always looking for the chance to turn beloved people against one another. In that situation what was Jesus thinking? Look at verse 3. He could see way beyond the imminent threat. He could see God above all and in sovereign control of all things. He could see how, through his own obedience, God was in fact putting all things under *his* power. And again, he could see that he had come from God and was returning to God. In other words, though what Judas was thinking was threatening his very life, Jesus felt totally secure and free; he wasn’t worried at all.

So what did he do? Read verses 4,5. For the disciples, this was a real shocker. It was a little like the President of the United States at a cabinet meeting suddenly getting up and pouring coffee for each one of his cabinet members. But what Jesus did was way more dramatic. He changed his clothes into a servant’s outfit. And he wasn’t just serving food or beverages; he went for his disciples’ dirty feet and started washing them, one person at a time. In their culture people didn’t use chairs; at meals they would lay down on floor cushions at low-lying tables. But in any culture, dirty feet are pretty bad—especially if you’re wearing sandals and walking on roads and streets where many animals also go. In households there were many kinds of servants, but the foot-washing task was reserved for the very least of them. We don’t know exactly why the disciples hadn’t had their feet washed before this meal, but what we do know is that Jesus himself started washing and drying them with his own hands.

Why? Verse 1 tells us that this was his love. It shows us several things about the nature of Jesus’ love. Jesus’ love is humble. Jesus’ love takes the initiative. Jesus loves first, even when people have no idea to love him back. Jesus’ love is expressed not in mere words, but in acts of service. Jesus loves us even in our dirtiness and smelliness. Jesus’ love is also so personal and intimate. Jesus wanted each one of his disciples to experience his love. Only when we experience his love can we love him in return (1Jn4:19). In brief, Jesus doesn’t come at us demanding respect and obedience; he comes to us as a humble and loving servant, ready to embrace us at our worst. How beautiful he is!

How did they react? Look at verses 6–8a. In a sense Simon Peter is representing them all. To him it was outrageous for Jesus to be doing such a lowly thing. It made Peter so uncomfortable he had to stop him. Some people are embarrassed to have something done for them. But for Peter it was more than that; he had tremendous respect for Jesus. When he tried to stop him, Jesus said something even more shocking: “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me” (8b). Jesus was teaching a profound truth for us all. We all have to let Jesus wash our dirty feet, overcoming our feelings of embarrassment and our own ideas. It’s a metaphor for letting Jesus cleanse us of our sins. If we’re always trying to do things for him, it may seem good on the surface, but we won’t really have a relationship with him. We get connected to Jesus only through his grace of forgiveness. Like letting him wash one’s dirty, smelly feet, it’s hard to bring out our sins and let Jesus touch them. But it’s so necessary (cf. 1Jn1:7,9).

How does Peter respond? Look at verse 9. He does a flip-flop. It shows his passionate, extreme character. He so much wants a relationship with Jesus, but he doesn’t yet understand, or really know himself. Jesus then teaches something else. Read verse 10. It’s another metaphor for Christian life. Having a bath means to come to Jesus at first and accept his grace of forgiveness. That’s what makes us “clean” fundamentally. But just as people’s feet got dirty walking through life and needed daily washing, so as we live in this sinful world, we sin daily. We don’t need to re-confess all our past sins every day, but we do need to come to Jesus each day for his cleansing of our daily sins. In verse 10b Jesus gives a veiled reference to Judas, who was about to betray him (11). Judas needed a much deeper cleansing; in fact, he’d never really opened his heart to Jesus; he was holding back with his own agenda, which was so dangerous spiritually. Jesus spoke these words to help Judas repent even now (cf. 6:70,71).

Jesus went on to explain what he just did. Read verses 12–17. Yes Jesus wants us to experience his love. But he also wants us to learn how to show his love toward one another. Some Christian groups do literal foot-washing, trying to practice what Jesus taught here. But to wash one another’s feet is way more than just taking off socks and using water and soap. Washing one another’s feet means serving one another, helping one another, bearing with one another, forgiving one another in the daily trenches of life. It’s an unselfish, humble, serving life. Just as when Jesus did it, it requires taking the initiative. It always requires humility. It requires real love and acceptance. Sometimes it even requires getting our hands dirty. Most of all, Jesus asked them to do it only after *he* washed *their* feet. It tells us that to love others like Jesus did, we first need to let Jesus love us. The deeper we appreciate his love for us, even in all our sin, even to die in our places, the more we can learn how to love.

So many people know a lot but don’t know how to love in real life. In fact, they’re sadly incapable of loving. Why? Because their own love tanks are empty; they’ve got nothing to give, even if they wanted to. It’s foolish to demand something from someone who doesn’t have it to give, right? This is why it’s so important for each person to first experience Jesus’ love deeply. It’s what prepares us to truly love one another. Loving others like Jesus is not just what women do or what moms do; Jesus is asking all his followers, men and women, young and old, to do it. For all of us, learning how to love like Jesus is a life-long journey. We should never think of ourselves too highly; we always need to remember the example our Lord Jesus set when he humbled himself to wash his disciples’ feet (16). There’s a big difference between *knowing* we should love and serve one another, and actually *doing* it. Showing this kind of love doesn’t have to be epic; it can start with very simple acts of service that anybody can do. Often we won’t feel like doing it. But as we obey Jesus’ teaching in daily life, we start experiencing the joy that comes from serving others. It changes us from self-centered persons to Jesus-centered and others-centered persons. It may seem hard to love like Jesus, but in verse 17 he says it’s a truly blessed life.

Read verse 14 again. May God help each of us to experience the love of our Lord Jesus very personally, letting him wash us of our sins, whatever they may be. And may God help us remember to imitate his great love, loving the real people in our lives faithfully and humbly, the way Jesus did.