

A COMMUNITY OF FOOT-WASHERS
John 13:1-17

Jesus and his disciples were gathered in a borrowed loft to celebrate the Feast of the Passover. This annual holy day commemorated how the Lord brought the children of Israel out of Egypt in the Exodus. The name “Passover” specifically recalled how the Lord judged Pharaoh’s hard heart by putting to death the firstborn son of every Egyptian household. But death passed over the homes of the Jews that were covered by blood on the doorposts.

As Jesus and his disciples celebrated the Passover, little did the disciples know this would be the last meal they would share with Jesus. Within hours, Jesus would be betrayed, arrested, and crucified. John 13-17 records THE UPPER ROOM DISCOURSE, in which Jesus gave his disciples final instructions and prayed for them. Our text begins this discourse. All that Jesus will say to his disciples in their final hours together flows from this scene in which Jesus washes the disciples’ feet. Through this enacted parable Jesus commands his disciples to follow his example by serving one another.

A certain man, after hearing his pastor preach on this text, sought clarification. He said to his pastor, “If I got it right, all of life is about basin theology. Either I can be like Jesus and use a basin to serve others. Or I can be like Pilate and take a basin to wash my hands of Jesus. That is the meaning of our text and the nature of Christianity. Servant hood is essential to Christianity. To be a follower of Jesus Christ is to follow his example by serving others. The church is to be a community of foot-washers. *What does it mean to be a community of foot-washers?* John 13:1-17 teaches three important lessons about true servant hood.

I. THE MOTIVATION FOR SERVICE IS LOVE.

Verse 1 says, *“Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”* This opening verse tells us what time it is. As it relates to the human calendar, it was *“the Feast of the Passover.”* As it relates to the divine schedule, *“Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world to the Father.”* Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus responds to circumstances by asserting his hour had not yet come. But *his hour* – which will begin with his betrayal and crucifixion and conclude with his resurrection and ascension – had now come. Notice how John emphasizes the sovereign authority of Jesus, even as the shadow of the cross grows larger and darker: *“his hour had come to depart from this world to the Father.”* Without mentioning the excruciating pain and spiritual agony of the cross, John describes the Passion of Christ as if Jesus were simply a traveller preparing to board a plane home after an extended business trip. Jesus knew the hour had come for him to depart back home to the Father.

What was on Jesus' heart and mind as he prepared to depart to the Father? Verse 1 says, *"Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."* As Jesus prepared to depart to the Father, his final acts were consumed with and driven by *love*. Jesus *"loved his own who were in the world."* We are prone to think of the love of Jesus for the whole world. But the love of Jesus for his own disciples distinguishes between common grace and special grace. Common grace is the love God has for all humanity. Matthew 5:45 says, *"For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."* The fullest expression of divine love for all humanity is the INCARNATION of Jesus. John 3:16 says, *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."*

God loves the world of sinners with common grace. But he loves his own with special grace. John describes this special grace in the last clause of verse 1: *"he loved them to the end."* This statement is not about the duration of Christ's love. The love of Christ is unending and unchanging and unconditional. This statement, *"he loved them to the end,"* is about degree of Christ's love for his own. Christ loved his own fully and completely and perfectly. This is what motivated the final words and acts of Jesus. Ultimately, Jesus did what he did in obedience to the Father's will and for the Father's glory. But Jesus also did what he did out of his perfect, sacrificial, and eternal love for his own. Christian service begins with love in your heart, not a towel in your hand. Ask the Father to fill your heart with the love of Christ that will move you to serve others.

II. THE MODEL OF SERVICE IS JESUS.

Verses 2-11 record the act of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. It was a dramatic and disturbing example of Christian servant hood.

A. THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS IS DRAMATIC.

Verse 2-5 says, *"During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing 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. 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."*

As the disciples traveled to the Upper Room, their feet became dirty. Basic hospitality called for the washing of guests' feet when they entered your home. But Luke 22:24 says, *"A dispute also rose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest."* Jesus had not departed to the Father yet. But the disciples were already arguing about who was going to be in charge. No one was going to give up leverage by washing the others' feet. So they all reclined at the table with dirty feet. This is still the root of institutional conflict in the church. When we are more

concerned about who is in charge than serving one another, conflict arises and Christ is dishonored. Jesus responded by washing the disciples' feet.

Verse 2 says, *"During supper, when the devil had already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him."* Judas had already cut a deal with the religious leaders to betray Jesus. During the meal, Judas will slip out of the room to carry out this damnable act. Scripture holds Judas directly accountable for his actions. But John says the devil put into the heart of Judas to betray Jesus. Verses 10-11 make it clear that Judas was unregenerate. Satan had free reign in his heart. Satan and Judas were on one accord about the death of Jesus. Yet this wicked betrayer is still in the room when Jesus began to wash the disciples' feet. *Would you have washed Judas's feet?* I would have. But I would have made sure the water was scalding hot! I believe Jesus washed Judas' feet more tenderly than he did the others. JOHN PHILLIPS comments: "We see the feet of Judas, feet washed by the Savior – and, a few chapters later, the feet of Jesus, feet wounded by the sinner." This service for one who would soon betray him for money reminds us we are called to serve but are not given the right to determine who deserves our service.

Verse 3 says, *"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."* Jesus was perfectly aware of his sovereign authority, divine origin, and eternal destiny. Yet his divine majesty did not prevent him from washing his disciples' feet. To the contrary, his knowledge of who he was permitted him to serve in a lowly fashion without having a complex about what others would think. This is why Christian doctrine and duty must go together. You cannot live the life that Christ has called you to if you do not know who you are in Christ. Our union to Christ settles the matter of my self-esteem. I do not need praise or prestige or positions to make me who I am. I am somebody because I am in Christ and Christ is in me.

Verses 4-5 says, *"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."* Foot-washing was assigned to the lowliest servant in a household. If a man had Jewish and Gentile servants, the non-Jew would wash feet. Children would wash their parents feet. Wives would wash their husbands feet. It is unheard of for one in authority to wash the feet of those under him. But this is exactly what Jesus did. It was just a snapshot of what Jesus did in his INCARNATION. Philippians 2:6-7 says *"though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."* Furthermore, this foot-washing foreshadows what Jesus will do on the cross. Philippians 2:8 says: *"And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."*

B. THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS IS DISTURBING.

Verses 6-10 record a conversation between Jesus and Simon Peter that shows us how disturbing Jesus washing the disciples' feet was.

PETER'S TROUBLING QUESTION. As Jesus washed the disciples' feet, there was a hushed silence in the room. The disciples were embarrassed for themselves and Jesus. Much is communicated by the glances they give one another. But no one said a word, until Jesus got to *Peter*. Someone had to say something. If no one else would, Peter would. Verse 6 says, "He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, do you wash my feet?'" The pronouns in that statement are emphatic: "Lord, do YOU wash MY feet?" Peter was impetuous and prone to think before he spoke. But this question was not another example of Peter running his mouth before his thoughts could catch up. Peter was incredulous about what he was seeing. It cut right through his notions of leadership and greatness and authority. In his mind, being in charge meant others serve you. Great people did not serve, and definitely not such degrading service as washing feet. This didn't make sense to Peter. So he asked Jesus, "What do you think you're doing?"

Verse 7 says, "Jesus answered him, *'What I am doing you do not understand, but afterward you will understand.'*" According to verse 15, Jesus was giving his disciples an example to follow. But the disciples did not understand what Jesus was doing. Moreover, this humble act was a foreshadowing of the selfless act of redemption Jesus would perform on the cross. But they would not understand this greater meaning until after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Peter did not understand what Jesus was doing. But Jesus called upon Peter to submit to him. This is a powerful challenge for us today. *How often does the Lord work in our lives and in the church in ways we do not understand?* But we must not allow what we do not understand to be an excuse to reject what Jesus is doing. Proverbs 3:5-6 says: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."

PETER'S STUBBORN REFUSAL. Peter questioned Jesus. Jesus answered Peter. But if you thought that would be the end of the conversation, you don't know Peter. Verse 8 says, "Peter said to him, 'You shall never wash my feet.'" In the original, Peter uses a double negative. And the word "never" means "not for eternity." Peter was defiant. Jesus would wash his feet over his dead body. On one hand, Peter's refusal was an expression of humility. He did not want Jesus to perform such a lowly service for him. On the other hand, Peter's refusal was an expression of pride. Peter was too humble to have Jesus wash his feet but not too humble to dictate to Jesus what he would and would not do.

In verse 8, Jesus responds, *"If I do not wash you, you have no share with me."* This is a metaphorical reference to the forgiveness of sins. 1 John 1:7 says, "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." If Jesus does not wash you, you have no share with him. Unwashed people do not belong to Jesus. This is a powerful reminder that salvation is based upon what Christ does for you, not what you do for Christ. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." True disciples not only have a strong desire to serve Christ, they also have humble submission that permits Christ to serve them.

PETER'S DEVOTIONAL CONCLUSION. This exchange between Peter and Jesus reveals various ways people may respond to your service. Some may question your

service. Some may refuse your service. Some may take advantage of your service. Peter did all three in this encounter with Jesus. He questioned Jesus. He refused Jesus' service. Then he tried to take advantage of Jesus' service. In verse 8, Jesus told Peter if he did not wash him he had no share with him. In verse 9, Peter said, *"Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head."* This is a wonderful expression of devotion to Jesus. Peter did not understand or agree with what Jesus was doing. But Peter wanted to be with Jesus. And if being with Jesus required washing, Peter wanted the full-service cleaning.

Verses 10-11 says, *"Jesus said to him, 'The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean, and you are clean, but not every one of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'"* A person invited by a friend to dinner would take a bath, get dressed, and walk to his friend's house. Because he traveled in open-toe sandals on unpaved dirt roads, when he arrived at his friend's house, his feet would be dusty and dirty. But he would not take another bath at his friend's house. He just needed his feet washed. This is a practical illustration of Christian salvation. When Jesus washes you in REGENERATION, you are clean. But as you travel this sin-tainted, self-centered, Satan-infiltrated world, your feet get dirty. But you do not lose your salvation. You just need your feet washed. 1 John 1:9 says, *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*

III. THE MANDATE OF SERVICE IS INESCAPABLE.

In verses 2-11, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. In verses 12-17, Jesus explains the meaning and implications of his washing the disciples' feet. These verses teach us that the mandate of service is inescapable. Consider three lessons Jesus teaches here about what it means to be a community of foot-washers.

A. FOOT-WASHERS OBEY THE COMMAND OF JESUS.

Verse 12 says, *"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?'"* This is a rhetorical question. The disciples did not understand. So Jesus explains. In verse 13, Jesus says, *"You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am."* *Teacher* refers to the rabbinical role of spiritual instruction. *Lord* is a title of authority. In John's Gospel, it conveys divine authority. Jesus does not reject these titles. Or he does not say that it is right to call him Teacher but wrong to call him Lord. Jesus affirms the disciples are right to call him Teacher and Lord. But to call Jesus Teacher and Lord is to accept divine obligation. Verse 14 says, *"If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."*

Jesus argues from greater to lesser here. If their Lord and Teacher has washed their feet, they ought to wash one another's feet. The word *"ought"* means to owe or to be in debt. It is used to speak of a necessary duty. Jesus is not recommending we wash one another's feet. As Lord and Teacher, Jesus commands us

to wash one another's feet. If you are not willing to serve others, you really do not have the right to call Jesus your Teacher and Lord. In Luke 6:46, Jesus asks, *"Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?"*

Some read this command to wash one another's feet in a wooden-literal sense and view it as a Christian ordinance, like baptism and the Lord's Supper. But the New Testament gives no indication the early church understood it that way. Foot-washing is only mentioned again in 1 Timothy 5:10 to illustrate the hospitality of godly widows. Throughout church history, this command to wash one another's feet has been understood to mean we should do whatever it takes to serve one another, no matter how menial the task. To be a community of foot-washers is to live with this question on your lips: "Is there anything I can do for you?"

B. FOOT-WASHERS FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS.

In verse 15, Jesus explains the driving force of this call to serve: *"For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you."* The world is not big on the idea of servant hood. It views those who have others to serve them as great. But we must not follow the example of the world. We are to follow the example of Jesus. We should follow his example in salvation. Matthew 11:29 says, *"Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."* We should also follow his example in suffering. 1 Peter 2:21 says, *"For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps."* And we should follow his example in service. John 13:15 says, *"For I have given you an example that you also should do just as I have done to you."* My mom sews. She would lay a pattern out and then cut the material to fit the pattern. Then she would sew the garment on the basis of the pattern. In washing the disciples' feet, Jesus laid down a pattern of what it means to be like him. To be like Jesus is to be a servant. You are not growing in grace and in the knowledge of Christ if you are not serving others.

Verse 16 says, *"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."* Jesus is the master and we are his servants. Jesus is the one who sends and we are his messengers. Yet he serves us. *Do you think you are better than Jesus?* To refuse to serve is to exalt self above the Lord Jesus Christ. But to serve is to descend into greatness. Think about it. The servant desires to be like the master. But Christ the master became a servant. So to be like the master is to be a servant. The highest rank in the power structure of the kingdom is that of a servant.

In 1878, when William Booth's Salvation Army began, men from all over the world began to enlist. A Methodist minister, Samuel Logan Brengle, enlisted with dreams of greatness. He now turned from a fine pastorate to joined Booth's Salvation Army. Brengle later became the Army's first American-born commissioner. But at first Booth accepted his services reluctantly and grudgingly. Booth said to Brengle, "You've been your own boss too long." To instill humility into Brengle, he sent him to work cleaning the boots of the other trainees. Brengle asked himself, "Have I followed my own fancy across the Atlantic in order to black

boots?" Then as in a vision he saw Jesus bending over the feet of rough, unlettered fishermen. "Lord," he whispered, "You washed their feet. I will black their boots."

- If Jesus washed feet, you can help park cars.
- If Jesus washed feet, you can greet worshipers and distribute bulletins.
- If Jesus washed feet, you can care for children in the nursery.
- If Jesus washed feet, you can lead the saints in praise to him.
- If Jesus washed feet, you can visit the elderly in convalescent homes.
- If Jesus washed feet, you can share the good news in the community.
- If Jesus washed feet, you can give up one service a month to pray for those who lead and participate in the service.

C. FOOT-WASHERS RECEIVE THE BLESSINGS OF JESUS.

Verse 17 says, *"If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."* This lost beatitude of Jesus is a paradox. G.K. CHESTERTON defined a paradox as truth standing on its head to get attention. This is what Jesus does in this verse. When we think of blessings, we tend to think of physical health, material prosperity, and career accomplishments. But Jesus declares the kingdom way to true blessedness.

IT IS A BLESSING TO KNOW THE TRUTH ABOUT SERVANTHOOD. Jesus says, *"If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."* The blessing begins with what you know. What you don't know can hurt you. Ignorance is bondage. But the truth will set you free. You are blessed if you know the truth about Christian humility, unselfishness and servanthood. But the blessing does not stop with what you know. IT IS A BLESSING TO LIVE THE TRUTH ABOUT SERVANTHOOD. D.L. MOODY said: "The scriptures were not given for our information, but for our transformation." The truth appeals the will, not just the intellect. Jesus says, *"If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."* The blessing is not in merely knowing the truth. It is in what you do with the truth you know. Christian obedience comes through obedient service.

In Matthew 21:28-31, Jesus tells a little parable about a certain man who had two sons. He said to one, "Go work in my vineyard today." The son answered, "I will not." But he later changed his mind and went. He said to the other, "Go work in my vineyard today." This son answered, "I go, sir." But he did not go. Then Jesus asks which of the boys did the will of the father. The answer is obvious. It was the one who actually obeyed the father's command. Hearing is just the start. Talk is cheap. Obedience pleases the Father. Why did this boy go after he said he would not? When he was interviewed, he said, "I meant it when I said I would not go. But I started thinking about all that my father had done for me. He had been too good for me not to do something for him!" And this should be your response when you think of all the Father in heaven has done for you through the Lord Jesus Christ.

YOU MAY BUILD GREAT CATHEDRALS LARGE OR SMALL
YOU MAY BUILD SKYSCRAPERS GRAND AND TALL
YOU MAY CONQUER ALL THE FAILURES OF YOUR PAST
BUT ONLY WHAT YOU DO FOR CHRIST WILL LAST.