

Sunday, March 7, 2021 | Easter Upside Down

John 13:1-17 | The Upper Room

Last week, we kicked off a brand-new series called "Easter Upside Down." In this four-week study, we'll be exploring four different scenes throughout the life of Jesus, which illustrates for us how that Jesus flipped conventional understanding on its head. What the world considers right; Jesus considered wrong. What the world considered necessary; Jesus considered inconsequential.

When we read the story of how Mary of Bethany took a jar of ointment and poured it over Jesus, we marveled at her boldness. She did not care what the others in the room thought. Even when scolded, she shined all the brighter because of it. Jesus even defended her, telling those who looked down on her that Mary had done something honorably and worth remembering for ages to come. And through Mary's example, we learned that true worship has nothing to do with what others think of us and everything to do with what Jesus thinks of us.

Today, we'll be in John 13. Like the story of Mary, this scene is quite famous. Jesus and his friends are in an upper room partaking of the Passover. Afterward, Jesus does something peculiar: he begins to wash the disciple's feet. Shock and awe shot through the room, and Peter almost resisted. But one by one, Jesus took those men's feet in his hands, feet that he himself had crafted, and washed away all the dirt and stink to teach them a valuable lesson.

READ: John 13:1-17 (ESV)

¹ 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. [Double entendre, which means both "fully" and "to the point of death.¹] ² During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, ³ 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, ⁴ rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. ⁵ 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.

⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" ⁷ Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." ⁸ Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered

¹ Keener, Craig S., *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, Vol. 2, (Grand Rapids; Baker Academic, 2003), p. 899.

him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." ⁹ Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean."

¹² 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? [The reality, of course, was that they didn't and, as John showed throughout his account, they often didn't understand.] ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

Before we unpack this passage, just as we did last week, I want you to direct your attention to the screens. This video is unique in that it creates a fictional character to give the perspective of an outsider. Her name is Mara, and while she never really existed, she acts as a fly on the wall witnessing this scene take place. <INSERT VIDEO>

Interestingly, the Synoptics record that right before Jesus washed the disciple's feet, the disciples were arguing about who would be the greatest. Thus, Matthew, Mark, and Luke seem to imply that Jesus' washing was a poignant response to their squabbling. Many an intelligent man has been humbled by the simple service of common men. Knowing is essential, but doing is the far more commendable thing. However, John makes no mention of such an argument. Instead, he presents the facts with little preamble or flourish. Rather than make the foot-washing a foil to the disciple's pride, it is more a lesson on the kind of humility which must indwell all those within the Kingdom.

What's remarkable is that Jesus washes their feet after dinner rather than before. In this way, Jesus' actions are unmistakably deliberate rather than a show of common courtesy. This parable-in-motion is not mere theatrics meant to instill a practice of foot washing, but a metaphor come to life meant to instill a practice of brotherly service, however that may look.²

² Morris, Leon, *The Gospel According to John*, Revised, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1995), p. 544.

John makes sure we know that Jesus knew what was coming. He was in complete control of his sense and commanded the situation in every way. Whereas Judas thought he was acting of his own accord, he was the unwitting servant to Divine sovereignty. John even points out that Jesus went from the Father to Bethlehem and will go from Calvary back to the Father.

Listen to how John describes this moment once more and pay particular attention to the verbs:

READ: John 13:3-5 (ESV)

³ 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, ⁴ rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. ⁵ 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.

Jesus rose, laid aside his coat, tied a towel around himself, poured water in a basin, washed, and wiped the feet of the disciples. The imagery John uses to paint this moment is so vivid and expressive that we are witnessing it first-hand. In fact, only Peter speaks, which implies the room would've been in stunned silence. Like John, all eyes were fixed on Jesus in awe and curiosity.

It's somewhat challenging to explain how bizarre this was. Since they were reclined at a table on one arm with their feet pointed away from the center, Jesus "comes away from the normal focus of gaiety to wash their feet."³ Only the lowest servants would wash someone's feet. Jews thought the practice was so beneath them that even Jewish slaves would resist doing such a thing and leave the task to a Gentile slave. What's more, it should go without saying, but roads weren't like ours during this time. They were unpaved, narrow, crowded, and had a thin layer of dust, dirt, and even excrement from humans and animals.⁴ Thus, even if one were thoroughly washed at home, they would still need their feet cleansed from a journey. And while foot-washing was common during this time, it was never a service that the honored host would've performed for others, especially when that honored host is not only a Rabbi but, as the disciples knew, the very Son of God. So, their shock and revulsion was not only because Jesus was breaching conventional practice; they were shocked because Jesus broke convention entirely. Their sense of what was "fit" was utterly shattered.⁵ Nowhere in the first-century Greco-Roman world is there even one example of a superior washing the feet of an inferior

³ Keener (2003), p. 908.

⁴ Keener (2003), p. 903.

⁵ Carson, D.A., *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Cambridge; Eerdmans, 1991), p. 462.

except here. As one commentator put it, “Jesus the teacher renders a service to his pupils rather than vice versa, and the specific task performed exceeds that from which even pupils in contemporary Judaism were exempt.”⁶ Jesus did something truly exceptional here.

Yet Peter would not remain silent. Even the Greek syntax of Peter’s response, “Are you going to wash my feet?!” highlights how indignant and emphatic Peter was.⁷ Peter would’ve gladly washed Jesus’ feet. This task would’ve been an honor to him. But the thought of the Messiah washing his own feet was a thought unthinkable. Yet Jesus insists on washing Peter’s feet and then commands he does the same for his fellow man.⁸ While on the one hand, we have to admit that Peter is clearheaded enough to see the incongruity between Jesus’ station and the task at hand; we also have to admit that Peter was also thickheaded enough to dictate his Master’s actions. Even after being corrected, Peter presumes yet again to dictate what Jesus should do. But Jesus’ point in the foot washing was not to cleans as much of the surface area as possible. His point was to get the disciples to accept the act of service he was performing for them at that moment so that they will also receive a far more unacceptable thing that will be done on their behalf later: the cross. All who wish to be with Jesus must accept the service Jesus does on their behalf, even if that service is deemed to be far too much.

Now, one last thought before we talk about the foot-washing itself. Jesus cleanses all of their feet, even Judas—the very one who would betray him. Imagine Jesus at that moment as he held Judas’ feet. As Jesus took care to wet and wipe his toes, his arch, and his heel. How Jesus did not skimp out or ignore Judas for what he was about to do but lovingly washed the feet of his own betrayer. In all of the NT, aside from the cross itself, there is no better example of what Jesus meant when he commanded us in Matthew 5:44, “Love and prayer for your enemies.”⁹

Now, what did the actual washing of the disciple’s feet represent? What lessons was it trying to teach? **There are three lessons Jesus was trying to teach.**

i. Their need for a one-time cleansing.

When Jesus initially picked up the towel and began washing the disciples’ feet it was a parable that would be explained when Jesus took up the cross and the Spirit indwelt them. Just as Jesus was the suffering servant on calvary (cf. Isa. 53), he was also the humble servant in the upper room. Just as he washed the disciples’ feet with ordinary water, so too will they be

⁶ Köstenberger, Andreas J., *John*, The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids; Baker Academic, 2004), p. 405.

⁷ Carson (1991), p. 463.

⁸ Morris (1995), p. 551-552.

⁹ Köstenberger (2004), p. 403.

washed with the living waters (cf. Jn. 7:37-39). In fact, they were in many ways already clean, as Jesus will say later...

READ: John 15:3 (ESV)

Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.

So, foot-washing was a metaphor to explain the cleansing power of God's word. Symbolically they were already clean, and literally, they were soon to be cleansed.¹⁰ In believing Jesus, the disciples have been washed thoroughly, once and for all time, and reconciled to God. But the foot-washing also foreshadowed another time in which Jesus would even have his garments removed, and instead of taking up a towel, he would take up a cross.

ii. Their need for an on-going cleansing.

But thanks to Peter's outburst, we also have a second application of the foot-washing metaphor. Contrasted in Jesus' speech are the two words "bathe" and "wash."¹¹ Just as a person who has bathed at home will need to wash their feet after a journey, so too will the disciple need to confess their sins daily to maintain fellowship with God. This is not to say that salvation is progressive. As I just said, we are cleansed once and for all the moment we believe God's word and confess our sins to Christ. However, we are still in the world though we are no longer of the world. And being in the world has its own way of contaminating the believer. They stumble. They make mistakes. They sin. Does this mean they are lost? No. It means that while their souls have experienced the rejuvenating power of the Christ, their bodies are still broken and bent and thus in need of continual repentance until those bodies are redeemed like their souls (cf. 2 Cor. 5).

John, the same one who wrote the Gospel of John, wrote to a small church community in Ephesus. These were believers (cf. 1 Jn. 5:13), but they were nevertheless struggling with their salvation. This was due in no small part to false teachers, and while John admonished the Church to purge the community of such people, he also gave them some practical advice. Prime amongst that advice was personal, continual, a daily confession.

READ: 1 John 1:5-10 (ESV)

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we

¹⁰ Keener (2003), p. 910.

¹¹ Köstenberger (2004), p. 407.

have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Nothing will drive you closer to God than daily confession, and nothing will push you further from God, like refusing to do so. A child who refuses to admit they're wrong will breach fellowship with their parents but will still remain a child. Likewise, those who resist daily confession, though they've experienced the one-time cleansing power of the Gospel, will have a broken and dysfunctional Christian life.

Jesus wanted the disciples to know, and all would-be followers to know, that while the salvation of the soul happens once, the Christian life is an on-going process in which God slowly and overtime molds you into a more perfect image-bearer of Christ. Fellowship with him requires being cleansed by him.

iii. Their need to “cleanse” each other.

Not only is foot-washing a *metaphor* to explain what Jesus was about to do on the cross and what the believers must do after the cross, but it is also a *symbol* for what the Christ-follower must do on behalf of their brothers and sisters. It is not only an explanation of the salvific work of God; it is an example of the humble service Christ has done for us, and we must do for others.

Now, let me be clear, Jesus was not instituting a third ordinance in the Church.¹² He was not putting foot-washing on par with the Lord's Supper and Baptism. In a way, I wish he had for a simple ordinance would've been preferable to the extreme act of love Jesus hinting at.

READ: John 15:12-14 (ESV)

¹² This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you.

If a disciple was willing to wash fellow-disciples feet, they would be far more inclined to die for that same disciple. In willingly serving one another in culturally unacceptable ways that are generally regarded as demeaning, that disciple takes the posture of the Messiah Himself. To

¹² Carson (1991), p. 468.

wash another's feet is to walk in the feet of the Son of God. We have been set free, and so we freely serve one another.

READ: Galatians 5:13-15 (ESV)

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

This argument hinges on a greater to the lesser comparison.¹³ If Jesus—who is the Great I am—would willingly serve the lesser, we who are all the "lesser" ought to willingly serve our equals.

So, what's the takeaway?

For the Christ-follower, menial service is meaningful service.

In every society, the focus has always been to be on top. People are, more or less, content to pay their dues and work the lower rungs if it means that someday those tasks will be mitigated over time through delegating them to another, often younger and inexperienced, person. Yet, the Kingdom of God is not a mountain to climb but a community to serve. This is not because of our fellow-laborers example, but because of the model of our master and the one who has sent us. He became a servant, and so should we.

READ: Philippians 2:5-7 (NKJV)

⁵ Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, ⁷ but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, *and* coming in the likeness of men.

If the Son of God became a slave for mankind, what excuse do we have that would exempt us from serving one another. No task is too small. No job is too boring. No work is too basic. No chore is too undignified when one considers that the God who made the feet of man also stooped to make them clean.

*Great God, in Christ you call our name
and then receive us as your own,
not through some merit, right, or claim,
but by your gracious love alone.
We strain to glimpse your mercy-seat
and find you kneeling at our feet.*

¹³ Köstenberger (2004), p. 408.

*Then take the towel, and break the bread,
and humble us, and called us friends.
Suffer and serve till all are fed,
and show how grandly love intends
to work till all creation sings,
to fill all worlds, to crown all things.*

- Brian A. Wren

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

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If the Son of God became a slave for mankind, what excuse do we have that would exempt us from serving one another. No task is too small. No job is too boring. No work is too basic. No chore is too undignified when one considers that the God who made the feet of man also stooped to make them clean.

Pastor's manuscript can be found here: