

## **He Loved Them to the End**

Scripture: John 13:1–17

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In the final hours before His arrest and execution—at a time when our feeble minds would have been consumed with anxiety and panic—Christ put His friends first. The Lord spent His fleeting moments of freedom faithfully ministering to them, preparing them for their own ministry, and laying the foundation of the church He would build through them.

And it all began with a simple but poignant display of humility, as the Creator of the universe stooped to wash their feet (John 13:1-17). The shocking significance of that moment is largely lost on modern audiences.

Everyone in that culture faced the same problem. On good days the roads were covered with a grimy layer of tenacious dust. On rainy days every pathway became a quagmire. Either way, no pedestrian's feet could remain filth-free. So at the entrance to every Jewish home was a large basin of water to wash visitors' feet. Normally, footwashing was regarded as a slave's task. The duty was always delegated to the lowest-ranking servant on site. When guests came, the servant was expected to go to the door and wash each traveler's feet—not a pleasant task.

In fact, this was probably the most abject duty ever performed in public. The disciples of rabbis were not even supposed to wash the feet of their masters. Footwashing was uniquely the task of a low-ranking slave.

When Jesus and His disciples arrived in the upper room there was no servant to wash their feet. It is not clear whether this was an oversight on the part of the person who owned the room, a failure attributable to one of the hired servants, a quirk of bad timing, or some other cause. What is clear is that it was a rather serious breach of protocol, yet not one of the disciples was willing to step into the servant's role and sacrifice his own personal pride or social status in order see that the needs of the group were met. Jesus Himself therefore took up the towel and basin and knelt to serve the others.

Jesus had previously taught them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35). "The one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great" (Luke 9:48). "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:11). If they had simply given mind and heart to His teaching, one of the twelve would have washed the others' feet. Or they might have mutually shared the task. It could have been a beautiful expression of brotherhood and kindness. Besides, it would have been no indignity at all, but an inestimable privilege, for any of those men to wash the feet of their Lord. (Remember, in Luke 7:37-38, a woman had transformed the act of anointing Jesus' feet into a profound and memorable expression of worship.) The basin was ready. The towel was right at hand. Everything necessary was within easy reach of all of them. But not one of the twelve stepped up to the task. The idea does not seem to have occurred to them.

A parallel passage in Luke gives us some insight into just what the disciples were thinking about that evening. They were preoccupied with the issue of personal rank within their circle of fellowship. As they reclined around the table, according to Luke, “And there arose also a dispute among them as to which of them was regarded to be greatest” (Luke 22:24).

What an appalling scene this was! What’s worse is that this was not a new topic of discussion among them. It was an extension of a long-running feud between the twelve as they vied for positions of high honor (Matthew 20:21-24).

No wonder none of them volunteered to wash feet. With arguments constantly percolating among them about who was the greatest, no one was voluntarily going to take up the towel and perform a slave’s task. Jesus’ repeated admonitions about the virtue of humble service seem to have made no impact whatsoever on them—even though this had been a theme of Jesus’ teaching from the very beginning. Remember, it was practically the central point of the Beatitudes: “The meek . . . shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5, ESV). And Jesus had driven the point home again and again with personal words of admonition for the twelve, always commending humility and rebuking pride (Matthew 20:25-28).

If anyone in that room had a right to be thinking about the glory that would be His in the kingdom, it was the Lord. John 13:1 expressly says, Jesus knew “that His hour had come that He depart out of this world to the Father.” He was on a divine timetable, conscious of the fact that He soon would be glorified: “Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God” (v. 3).

That’s when Jesus rose from the table, set aside His outer garments, and tied a simple towel around His waist. “Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded” (John 13:5). Having willingly set aside the glory that was rightfully His, and in spite of the disciples’ appalling selfishness, Jesus’ main concern that night was to demonstrate His personal love to the twelve so that they might be secure in it.

John 13:1 says, “having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.” “To the end” in the Greek text is *eis telos*, meaning, literally, that He loved them to perfection. He loved them to the uttermost. He loved them with total fullness of love.

That is the innate nature of Christ’s love, and He showed it repeatedly—even in His death. “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). When Jesus was arrested, He arranged that the disciples would not be taken into custody. While He was on the cross, He made sure that John would care for His mother, Mary. He reached out to a dying thief and saved him. It is amazing that in those last hours of carrying the sins of the world, in the midst of all the pain and suffering He was bearing, He was conscious of that one would-be disciple hanging next to Him. He loves utterly, absolutely, to perfection, totally, completely, without reservation. At the moment when most men would have been wholly concerned with self, He selflessly humbled Himself to meet the needs of others. Genuine love is like that.

And here is the great lesson of this whole account: Only absolute humility can generate absolute love. It is the nature of love to be selfless, sacrificial, self-giving. In 1 Corinthians 13:5, Paul made the

point that authentic love is never self-seeking. In fact, to distill all the truth of 1 Corinthians 13 into one statement, we might say that the greatest virtue of love is its humility, for it is the humility of love that proves it and makes it visible.

Christ's love and His humility are inseparable. He could not have been so consumed with a passion for serving others if He had been primarily concerned with Himself.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

(Adapted from [\*The Upper Room\*](#).)

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