

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Humility of Love

Scripture: John 13:1-17

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The Humility of Love

By John MacArthur

We live in a very proud and egotistical generation. It is now considered acceptable and even normal for people to promote themselves, to praise themselves, and to put themselves first. Pride is considered a virtue by many. Humility, on the other hand, is considered a weakness. Everyone, it seems, is screaming for his or her own rights and seeking to be recognized as someone important.

The preoccupation with self-esteem, self-love, and self-glory is destroying the very foundations upon which our society was built. No culture can survive pride run rampant, for all of society depends on relationships. When all people are committed first of all to themselves, relationships disintegrate. And that is just what is happening, as friendships, marriages, and families fall apart.

Sadly, the preoccupation with self has found its way into the church. Perhaps the fastest growing phenomenon in modern Christianity is the emphasis on pride, self-esteem, self-image, self-fulfillment, and other manifestations of selfism. Out of it is emerging a new religion of self-centeredness, pride--even arrogance. Voices from every part of the theological spectrum call us to join the self-esteem cult.

Scripture is clear, however, that selfism has no place in Christian theology. Jesus repeatedly taught against pride, and with His life and teaching He constantly exalted the virtue of humility. Nowhere is that more clear than in John 13.

John 13 marks a turning point in John's gospel and the ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus' public ministry to the nation of Israel had run its course and ended in her complete and final rejection of Him as Messiah.

On the first day of the week, Jesus had entered Jerusalem in triumph to the enthusiastic shouts of the people. Those people nevertheless misunderstood His ministry and His message. The Passover season had arrived, and by Friday He would be utterly rejected and executed. God, however, would turn that execution into the great and final sacrifice for sin, and Jesus would die as the true Passover

Lamb.

He had come unto His own people, the Jews, "and those who were His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11). So He had turned away from His public ministry to the intimate fellowship of His disciples.

Now it is the day before Jesus' death, and rather than being preoccupied with thoughts of His death, sin-bearing, and glorification, He is totally consumed with His love for the disciples. Knowing that He would soon go to the cross to die for the sins of the world, He is still concerned with the needs of twelve men. His love is never impersonal--that's the mystery of it.

In what were literally the last hours before His death, Jesus kept showing them His love over and over. John relates this graphic demonstration of it:

Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He should depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. During supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray him, 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, got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. 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.

So He came to Simon Peter. He said to him, "Lord, do You wash my feet?" Jesus answered and said to him, "What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter."

Peter said to Him, "Never shall You wash my feet!"

Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me."

Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, then wash not only my feet, but also my hands and my head."

Jesus said to him, "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you." For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, "Not all of you are clean."

So when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments and reclined at the table again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent Him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them." (John 13:1-17)

It is very likely that Jesus and the disciples had been hiding at Bethany during this final week before the crucifixion. Having come from there (or from anywhere near Jerusalem), they would have had to travel on extremely dirty roads. Naturally, by the time they arrived, their feet were covered with dust from the road.

Everyone in that culture faced the same problem. Sandals did little to keep dirt off the feet, and the roads were either a thick layer of dust or deep masses of mud. At the entrance to every Jewish home was a large pot of water to wash dirty feet. Normally, foot washing was the duty of the lowliest slave. When guests came, he had to go to the door and wash their feet--not a pleasant task. In fact, washing feet was probably his most abject duty, and only slaves performed it for others. Even the disciples of rabbis were not to wash the feet of their masters--that was uniquely the task of a slave.

As Jesus and His disciples all arrived in the upper room, they found that there was no servant to wash their feet. Only days before, Jesus had said to the twelve, "Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave" (Matthew 20:26-27). If they had given mind and heart to His teaching, one of the twelve would have washed the others' feet, or they would have mutually shared the task. It could have been a beautiful thing, but it never occurred to them because of their selfishness. A parallel passage in Luke 22 gives us an idea just how selfish they were and what they were thinking about that evening:

And there arose also a dispute among them as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest. And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.' But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant." (vv. 24-26)

What a sickening picture this is! They were bickering about who was the greatest. And in an argument about who is the greatest, no one is going to get down to the ground and wash feet. The basin was there, the towel was there, and everything was ready. But no one moved to wash the others' feet.

If anyone in that room should have been thinking about the glory that would be his in the Kingdom, it was Jesus. John 13:1 says that Jesus knew His hour was come. He was on a divine time schedule, and He knew He was going to be with the Father. He was very conscious of the fact that He soon would be glorified: "Jesus [knew] 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). But instead of being concerned with His glory, and in spite their selfishness, He was totally conscious of revealing clearly His personal love to the twelve that they might be secure in it.

Verse 1 says, "Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end." "To the end" in the Greek is *eis telos*, and it means this: He loved them to perfection. He loved them to the uttermost. He loved them with total fullness of love. That is the nature of Christ's love, and He showed it repeatedly--even in His death. When He was arrested, He arranged that the disciples would not be arrested. While He was on the cross, He made sure that John would give Mary a home and care in years to come. 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, giving. In 1 Corinthians 13:5, Paul said that love "does not seek its own." 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.

"Love...in Deed and Truth"

How could anyone reject that kind of love? Men do it all the time. Judas did. "During supper, the devil [had] already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him" (v. 2). Do you see the tragedy of Judas? He was constantly basking in the light, yet living in darkness; experiencing the love of Christ, yet hating Him at the same time.

The contrast between Jesus and Judas is striking. And perhaps that is the very reason the Holy Spirit included verse 2 in this passage. Set against the backdrop of Judas' hatred, Jesus' love shines even brighter. We can better understand its magnitude when we understand that in the heart of Judas was the blackest kind of hatred and rejection. The words of love by which Jesus gradually drew the hearts of the other disciples to Himself only pushed Judas further and further away. The teaching by which He uplifted the souls of the other disciples just seemed to drive a stake into the heart of Judas. And everything that Jesus said in terms of love must have become like chafing shackles to Judas. From his fettered greed and his disappointed ambition began to spring jealousy, spite, and hatred--and now he was ready to destroy Christ, if need be.

But the more men hated Jesus and desired to hurt Him, the more it seemed He manifested love to them. It would be easy to understand resentment. It would be easy to understand bitterness. But all

Jesus had was love--He even met the greatest injury with supreme love. In a little while He would be kneeling at the feet of Judas, washing them.

Jesus waited until everyone was seated and supper was served. Then, in a devastating act of humility that must have stunned the disciples,

[Jesus] got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. 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. (vv. 4-5)

With calmness and majesty, in total silence, Jesus stood up, walked over and took the pitcher, and poured the water into the basin. He then removed his outer robe, His belt, and very likely His inner tunic--leaving Him clothed like a slave--put a towel around His waist, and knelt to wash the feet of His disciples, one by one.

Can you imagine how that must have stung the disciples' hearts? Do you feel the pain, the regret, and the sorrow that must have shot through them? One of them could have had the joy of kneeling and washing the feet of Jesus. I'm sure they were dumb-founded and broken-hearted. What a painful and profound lesson this was for them!

We, too, can learn from this incident. Sadly, the church is full of people who are standing on their dignity when they ought to be kneeling at the feet of their brother. The desire for prominence is death to love, death to humility, and death to service. One who is proud and self-centered has no capacity for love or humility. Consequently, any service he may think he is performing for the Lord is a waste.

When you are tempted to think of your dignity, your prestige, or your rights, open your Bible to John 13 and get a good look at Jesus--clothed like a slave, kneeling, washing dirt off the feet of sinful men who are utterly indifferent to His impending death. To go from being God in glory (v. 3) to washing the feet of sinful, unglorious disciples (vv. 4-5) is a long step. Think about this: the majestic, glorious God of the universe comes to earth--that's humility. Then He kneels on the ground to wash the feet of sinful men--that's indescribable humility.

You see, for a fisherman to wash the feet of another fisherman is a relatively small sacrifice of dignity. But that Jesus Christ, in whose heart beat the pulse of eternal deity, would stoop down and wash the feet of lowly men, that's the greatest kind of humiliation. And that is the nature of genuine humility, as well as the proof of genuine love.

Love has to be more than words. The apostle John wrote, "Let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth" (1 John 3:18). Love that is real is love expressed in activity, not just words.

"If I Do Not Wash You, You Have No Part with Me"

Here we have one of the most interesting insights into Peter that we see anywhere in Scripture. As Jesus loves from disciple to disciple, He finally arrives at Peter, who must have been completely broken. He said with a mixture of remorse and incredulity, "Lord, do You wash my feet?" (v. 6), and perhaps he pulled back his feet.

Jesus replied to Peter, "What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter" (v. 7). At this point, Peter was still thinking that the Kingdom was coming, and Jesus was the King. How could he allow the King to wash his feet? It wasn't until after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension that Peter understood the total humiliation of Jesus.

Peter got bolder. In verse 8, he says, "Never shall You wash my feet!" To emphasize his words, Peter uses the strongest form of negation in the Greek language. He calls Jesus Lord, but acts as if he is. This is not praiseworthy modesty on Peter's part.

Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me."

Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, then wash not only my feet, but also my hands and my head." (vv. 8-9)

That is typical of Peter--he goes from one extreme ("Never shall You wash my feet!") to the other ("Not only my feet, but also my hands and my head.").

There is profound meaning in Jesus' words, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." You see, the typical Jewish mindset could not accept the Messiah humiliated. In Peter's mind, there was no place for Christ to be humiliated like this. He must be made to realize that Christ came to be humiliated. If Peter could not accept this act of humiliation, he would certainly have trouble accepting what Jesus would do for him on the cross.

There is yet another, more profound, truth in Jesus' words. He has moved from the physical illustration of washing feet to the spiritual truth of washing the inner man. Throughout John's gospel, when He dealt with people, Jesus spoke of spiritual truth in physical terms. He did it when He spoke to Nicodemus, the woman at the well, and the Pharisees. Now He does it with Peter.

He is saying, "Peter, unless you allow Me to wash you in a spiritual way, you are not clean and you have no part with Me." All cleansing in the spiritual realm comes from Christ, and the only way anyone can be clean is if he is washed by regeneration through Jesus Christ (Titus 3:5). No man has a relationship with Jesus Christ unless Christ has cleansed his sins. And no one can enter into the presence of the Lord unless he first submits to that cleansing.

Peter learned that truth--he preached it himself in Acts 4:12: "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved." When a man puts his faith in Jesus Christ, he's clean, and not until then.

"He Who Has Bathed...Is Completely Clean"

Thinking that the Lord was speaking of physical cleansing, Peter offered his hands and head--everything. He still did not see the full spiritual meaning, but he said in essence, "Whatever washing you've got to offer me that makes me a part of You, I want it."

Jesus, still speaking of spiritual washing, said, "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean" (v.10). There is a difference between a bath and a footwashing. In the culture of that day, a man would take a bath in the morning to get himself completely clean. As he went through the day, he had to wash his feet from time to time, because of the dusty roads, but he didn't have to keep taking baths. All he needed was to wash the dirt off his feet when he entered someone's home.

Jesus is saying this: once your inner man has been bathed in redemption, you are clean. From that point on, you do not need a new bath--you do not need to be redeemed again--every time you commit a sin. All God has to do is daily get the dust off your feet. Positionally, you are clean (as He told Peter in verse 10), but on the practical side, you need washing every day, as you walk through the world and get dirty feet.

That spiritual washing of the feet is what 1 John 1:9 refers to: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us [literally, keep on cleansing us] from all unrighteousness."

Jesus knew which of the disciples were truly cleansed by redemption. Furthermore, He knew what Judas' plans for the evening were: "For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, 'Not all of you are clean'" (v. 11). That should have pricked the heart of Judas.

Judas knew what He meant. Those words, combined with Jesus' washing his feet, constituted what would be the last loving appeal for Judas not to do what he was planning to do. What was going through the mind of Judas as Jesus knelt washing his feet? Whatever it was, it had no deterring effect on Judas.

"You also Ought to Wash One Another's Feet"

Notice what happened after Jesus finished washing their feet:

So when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments and reclined at the table again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them." (vv. 12-17)

Having inserted a parenthetical lesson on salvation--a sort of theological interlude--Jesus gets back to the real point He is teaching His disciples: that they need to begin to operate on the basis of humility.

He argues from the greater to the lesser. If the Lord of glory is willing to gird Himself with a towel, take upon Him the form of a servant, act like a slave, and wash the dirty feet of sinful disciples, it is reasonable that the disciples might be willing to wash each other's feet. The visual example Jesus taught surely did more good than a lecture on humility ever would have. It was something they never forgot. (Perhaps from then on they had a contest to see who got to the water first!)

Many people believe that Jesus was instituting an ordinance for the church. Some churches practice footwashing in a ritual similar to the way we have baptism and communion. I have no quarrel with that, but I do not feel that it is being taught in this passage. Jesus was not advocating a formal, ritualistic footwashing service.

Verse 15 says, "I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you." The word "as" is a translation of the Greek word *kathos*, which means "according as." If He were establishing footwashing as a pattern of ritual to be practiced in the church, He would have used the Greek word *ho*, which means "that which." Then He would have been saying, "I have given you an example that you should do what I have done to you."

He is not saying "Do the same thing I have done"; He is saying, "Behave in the same manner as I have behaved." The example we are to follow is not the washing of feet, it is His humility. Do not minimize the lesson by trying to make footwashing the important point of John 13. Jesus' humility is the real lesson--and it is a practical humility that governs every area of life, every day of life, in every experience of life.

The result of that kind of humility is always loving service--doing the menial and humiliating tasks for the glory of Jesus Christ. That demolishes most of the popular ideas of what constitutes spirituality.

Some people seem to think that the nearer you get to God the further you must be from men, but that's not true. Actual proximity to God is to serve someone else.

In terms of sacrificing to serve others, there was never anything Jesus was unwilling to do. Why should we be different? We are not greater than the Lord: "Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master; nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed [happy] if you do them" (vv. 16-17).

Do you want to be blessedly fulfilled and happy? Develop a servant's heart. We are His bondservants and a servant is not greater than his master. If Jesus can step down from a position of deity to become a man, and then further humble Himself to be a servant and wash the feet of twelve undeserving sinners, we ought to be willing to suffer any indignity to serve Him. That is true love, and true humility.

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