

I am privileged and humbled to have the chance to dig into John 13 with you today. Chapter 13 marks a turning point in John's gospel. I have sketched out a picture of the structure of John that was helpful to me as I studied this passage, and I hope may be helpful to you too.

We are here



Prologue (1:1-18)—Book of Signs (1:19-12:50)—Book of Glory/Exaltation (13:1:20:31)—Epilogue (21:1-25)

The book of signs (Chapters 1 through 12) narrates Jesus' messianic mission to the Jews, describing the signs he performs to persuade the Jewish people that he is the Messiah (ultimately ending with his rejection by the Jews). The book of glory (Chapters 13-20) marks a shift in perspective to Jesus' mission to the Twelve disciples. This portion of the book of John begins with the narrative account of Christ washing his disciples feet and then records the beginning of Jesus' final instructions to his disciples, often called the "Farewell Discourse." As Moses gave his last instructions to Israel in Deuteronomy before they crossed the Jordan river into the promised land, Jesus here gives extended directions to his disciples before he dies, describing his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension before they occur, setting the passion narrative into broader context that will be understood and deeply meaningful to the disciples *after* Jesus is glorified on the cross. Of the gospels, only that of John includes a lengthy section of Jesus' farewell to his disciples.

Before we jump into the text, will you pray with me?

*Father, thank you for your holy word, by which you reveal yourself to us. Thank you that you want us to know You intimately, and that you invite us into understanding. By your spirit, please open our hearts to what you have to teach us in this passage. May You alone be glorified. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Our passage opens by setting the scene.

**(v.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.**

We learn a lot from this opening verse. This is the last supper, Christ's final Passover. In John's gospel, Jesus' "hour" is the time of his crucifixion, when his saving work is accomplished through his atoning death. Many times in Jesus' earthly ministry we hear him state that his hour has not yet come. But now the hour is here. Jesus is fully aware of this and knows that his own horrible suffering and death are imminent. But instead of focusing on his own distress, he looks to the needs of his disciples. He loves fully and selflessly here in the upper room, even as he does to the end of his earthly life, and beyond. The phrase "to the end" also means "to the end of ends" or "without end," "forever." In Greek, the word is *telos*, which literally means "perfection." **Jesus loves his disciples as he loves us: *perfectly*.**

**(v. 2-3) During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, 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, rose from supper.**

In verse 2, we catch a glimpse of the spiritual reality wherein a battle rages between Jesus and Satan. We will see more of this later in the Chapter. Despite the enemy Satan who challenges, verse 3 asserts Christ's unquestioned and total authority, his divine origin, and his future glory. As he faced his death, Jesus knew he had complete and ultimate power and could easily defeat the devil in that moment and squash Judas in a flash of divine wrath.

And so the scene is set. Knowing that his time is limited, the fully divine and all-powerful God man rises from the dinner table...The suspense! What does he do??

**(v. 4-5) 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.**

Okay. This is NOT the story I would have written. Far from a “power move” as we might conceive it, Jesus makes a move that not only confuses the disciples but makes them *deeply* uncomfortable. This is a culture where people got where they were going by walking on dusty or muddy roads in open sandals. According to the custom of the day, servants awaited guests at the door and washed their feet so that, when they reclined at table right beside one another, their dirty feet would not interfere with their neighbor’s eating. This task of foot washing was reserved for the lowest servants, most frequently non-Jewish slaves. It is likely that the disciples sat in stunned and awkward silence as their Rabbi and Lord knelt on the ground before each of them to scrub the grime from their feet.

D.A. Carson writes: “Here Jesus reverses normal roles. His act of humility is as unnecessary as it is stunning and is simultaneously a display of love (v.1), a symbol of saving cleansing (v.6-9), and a model of Christian conduct.” (v.12-17)

Jesus is really doing *a lot* here. Let us talk about each of the functions of the foot washing that Carson mentions.

**First: a display of love.** In that time peers did not even wash one another’s feet, except very rarely and as a mark of great love. That a superior would wash the feet of his inferior was completely out of the question. And yet Jesus does. This is, indeed, a mark of great love on the part of Christ for his disciples, and it should be mentioned that Jesus washed the feet of *all twelve*, including Judas, who Jesus knew would soon betray him. This picture of love in action extends to love for enemies. We are to take note.

**Secondly: a symbol of saving cleansing.** The image of a humble Christ kneeling as a servant to cleanse physical filth from the feet of the disciples prefigures the humble Christ on the cross, enduring literal hell in order to cleanse the sin of humanity whom he loves.

We learn more about Jesus’ purpose for his action through his exchange with Peter. Let us jump back in:

**(v.6-11) He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, do you wash my feet?” Jesus answered him, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.” Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” 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.”**

Can I just say that I love Peter? He is so REAL. Peter is the guy that can't help himself, that has to blurt his inside thoughts out loud, but who always asks the question that benefits the whole class. Certainly not alone in his misunderstanding, Peter is shocked and appalled to see Jesus bent at his feet and exclaims: “You shall never wash my feet!” Jesus, ever patient with Peter, says “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” To have “no share” with Jesus means that one does not belong to him. Here we see that foot washing symbolizes the washing necessary for the forgiveness of sins. Peter says: “In that case, let me bathe head to toe!” James Montgomery Boice explains Jesus’ response: **“Jesus is telling Peter that he does not need to be born again and again and again. To be born again once is enough.** Nevertheless, as regenerated people, we do need to come to Christ for cleansing.”

Friends, Christ is faithful to provide this cleansing from the contaminating effects of sin! 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.”

**(v.12-18) 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? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.**

In addition to being an act of love and a symbol of spiritual cleansing, the foot washing episode is thus established as **(3) a model for Christian conduct.** Jesus calls out the foot

washing as an example for the disciples to follow. Although this has been interpreted by some to mean literal foot washing, it is more likely that Jesus' emphasis is on humility and servanthood. In the act of washing his disciples feet, Jesus demonstrates his own claim to have come as a servant. Luke 22:27: "I am among you as the one who serves." Paul would later describe Christ as servant in Philippians 2:6-8 as one, "who, 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. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

We are to called to selflessly serve one another. Interestingly, as Jesus explains the example he has just set, he distinguishes between knowledge and action **(v.17) If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them)**. It is possible therefore, to *know* and *not do*. What an easy trap for us! Where do you struggle to put God's call to selfless love into action? As I considered this question, I had almost too many examples to count! Selfless love for my kids looks like patience, but I am so TIRED! Selfless love for a friend in struggle could look like answering that call, but what if I don't have the answers or say the right things? Selfless love for our neighbors could look like hosting a play date, but I just cleaned the house!

Jesus speaks to this issue in Luke 6:46-49: "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord' and not do what I tell you? Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great." Our barriers to action may help us identify the foundation upon which we place our hope and build our lives and our identities. I must continually fight my tendencies to put my hope in REST, control, achievement, A CLEAN HOUSE.

As always, Christ has the answer because he IS the answer.

Knowing that his disciples will struggle to follow his radical example of selfless love, Jesus goes—as he so often does—directly at the heart: **“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 knew that his call to follow his example of servanthood could never be answered unless his disciples rightly ordered their hearts. Jesus is Lord, and we are his servants. But if we are honest, don't we often have this inverted? I admit that I often act as if I am Lord, and he is the servant. Too often my prayers center on what the Lord can do for *me*, with far fewer words spent on what I might do for *Him*. I want to make own decisions, set my own path, and be in control.

We are not *meant* to be at the center of our universe. Indeed, we are woefully inadequate to occupy that space. Only Christ can hold the center, bringing right order to the system. Colossians 1:17 says of Jesus: “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Hebrews 1: 3: “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.” Christ who knelt at the disciples feet is the same Christ that holds the universe together by the power of his word. When this Jesus Christ sits on the throne of our hearts, we are happily willing to cede control to Him who is worthy, and to follow His commands—his radical example of humble love. Jesus is telling his disciples: I really am the Lord, and I want you to see it!

Let's jump back into the text at verse 21: **After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, “Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.”**

Here we see the humanness of Christ. His anguish was so apparent that it caught the attention of his friends. Jesus was fully God, but also *fully human*. He was not a stoic deity far removed from feeling, but flesh and blood, fully emotionally engaged and deeply affected by the treachery of one of his closest friends. Unlike the foot washing, the symbolic action of Jesus identifying Judas as betrayer by passing bread is one that was not made clear to everyone. In fact, it is likely that only Peter and John would have understood its significance, even without understanding how imminent the betrayal was to be. Judas must have been physically close to

Jesus, in fact, many biblical scholars agree that he was seated to Jesus' left at supper, the place of honor. John was seated at the right hand of Jesus. This is why Peter—curious, lovely Peter—motions to John to ask Jesus who it was that would betray him. It was customary for the host at a feast (Jesus fills this role at the last supper) to pass a particularly tasty bite to a guest as a mark of honor or friendship. Given this context it is appropriate to think of the bread passed to Judas not as a sign of judgement by Jesus, but as a final gesture of love. Jesus loved Judas perfectly, even as Judas' heart hardened against him for good. Jesus was immensely patient with Judas during the three years of his earthly ministry. How incredible! In fact, Jesus was so patient and kind to Judas that none of the other disciples had any clue that it was *he* who would betray the master.

We see Judas, and as people who want to know what the bible teaches, we should be sobered. The confusion among the disciples after Jesus predicts his betrayal indicates that *none* had reason to suspect it was Judas. Even after years of following Jesus and living together. The sinful rebellion of Judas was hidden *deep* within his heart. On the surface he must have looked like he had it all together. We learn, by Judas' presence among the Twelve, that we cannot discern the elect of the Lord, although we LOVE to try, don't we? Boice writes: "Appearances are important, but they are not incontestable evidence of the presence or absence of the divine life." Judas was among the disciples but was not born-again. Proximity to Jesus is **not enough to save us**. Not even sitting under perfect preaching of the word. Judas had all of it. Judas sat at Jesus' feet and at his table for 3 years. He witnessed Jesus healing the sick and raising the dead. He helped distribute the never-ending loaves and fish to the 5,000. But it wasn't enough. Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit, bringing new life to the heart of a person and allowing them to respond to Jesus Christ as Savior.

Let's turn to the next section of text:

**(v.31-35) But when he [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and glorify him at once. Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.' A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are**

**to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”**

Judas’ departure sets in motion the cascade of events leading to Jesus’ arrest, trial and execution. The new messianic community of Christ (the Twelve) has been literally cleansed (by the washing of feet) and now is figuratively cleansed by the removal of the betrayer. Here the Farewell Discourse begins, in which Jesus prepares his inner circle for what is to come.

Now, declares Jesus, is time for God’s glory, but not by the means any of the disciples would expect. The supreme moment of divine self-disclosure was in the shame of the cross. John uses “Son of Man” here intentionally—outside of the New Testament, this title is associated with glory. In the synoptic gospels (Matthew Mark and Luke) it is frequently associated with suffering. In John’s account, the two are dramatically brought together: Jesus will be glorified and glorify the Father *through* his suffering on the cross. Jesus knows that his disciples are still unprepared for the cross, but the groundwork he lays here will make it possible for them to one day understand.

Calling the disciples his “little children” (as head of family would), Jesus gently announces his departure, and tells them what he expects in his absence: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

God’s people were already called to love God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love their neighbor as themselves, what is new about Jesus’s commandment is that believers are to love one another *as he has loved them* (13:34)

DA Carson: “The new command is therefore not only the obligation of the new covenant community to respond to God who has loved them and redeemed them by the oblation of his Son, and their response to his gracious election which constituted them his people, it is a privilege which, rightly lived out, proclaims the true God before a watching world.”

In the last 3 verses of the chapter, our man Peter is so distressed by the thought of Jesus leaving that he totally derails the discussion about this new commandment:



**Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus answered him, “Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward.” Peter said to him, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” Jesus answered, “Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.”**

I know that the speakers in weeks to come will dive further into Peter and his denial of Jesus. For now, I would just highlight the problematic overconfidence with which he declares “I will lay down my life for you!”

Peter loved Jesus. Unlike Judas, Peter was a true believer, a friend of Christ. While Judas’ betrayal of Jesus was carefully calculated and absolutely deliberate, Peter never meant to deny Jesus. But we see that unless Christ holds us, *any one of us* can fall!

**This chapter should challenge us.**

- Jesus calls us to humble ourselves and serve others selflessly, even our enemies. This is hard.
- We are called to love others in ways that the world says are beneath us. In ways that even our own prideful hearts turn away from. This is HARD.
- We learn from Judas that proximity to Christ is insufficient for salvation (as we are utterly dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit). For people who are church-ed, who attend bible study—THIS is hard!

**But this chapter should also comfort us.**

- Jesus loves us perfectly. “To the end of ends.” Forever.
- Jesus is in control and always has been. (v.3) Judas’ betrayal does not take him by surprise. He *volunteered* to die for us. In John 10:18, Jesus says: “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.” (The cross was always the plan)
- Jesus is a gentle and effective teacher. He meets our needs, and longs for us to understand his heart.

- Jesus has made a way for our salvation (once for all) and stands ready to cleanse us from our sin whenever we ask.
- Jesus sets a clear example, and has given us the Holy Spirit (who IS at work) to bring renewal and regeneration, allowing us to follow him
- Jesus *can* hold the center. And he holds onto those who follow his voice. As Ellen said: “We are un snatchable” from the care of the Good Shepherd once we are his sheep.
- Jesus was fully human—he has experienced everything horrible on our behalf. For those who have been hurt, who have been betrayed, who have been alone: Jesus *understands*.

This chapter is heavy and ends on a hard note. But I would like to leave you with the next words of Jesus, which open John 14 (next week’s passage): **“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.”** Jesus was troubled in spirit, so *we don’t have to be!*

Friends, HE is the answer. It’s ok if our understanding is not perfect. Let us look to Him who alone is perfect, who ALONE is worthy, who invites us gently with His PERFECT love.

Let me pray for us as we go to our small groups:

*Lord, we come before you as imperfect women who are so grateful for your perfect love. Thank you for humbling yourself and willingly going to the cross for us. Help us find our identities and build our lives in YOU alone. By your spirit, please help us to love others selflessly—thank you for showing us how. We can love because you first loved us. Make this real to us this week, and bless our small group discussions. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*