

The Heart of Christ – the message of the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17)

“...having loved His own who were in the world, He love them to the end”(John 13:1.)

The Serving Christ

John 13:3-11

3 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, 4 got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. 5 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. 6 So He came to Simon Peter. He said to Him, "Lord, do You wash my feet?" 7 Jesus answered and said to him, "What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter." 8 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." 9 Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, then wash not only my feet, but also my hands and my head." 10 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." 11 For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, "Not all of you are clean."

Last week we began our look at the upper room discourse by noting from the first four verses of John 13 the emphasis of the Apostle upon the splendiddness of the Savior – that there is nothing like the attention, the affection, the attitude, the authority, and the action of Jesus Christ. If I might whittle these first four verses down even further, the emphasis is upon the great love that the perfect and eternal Son of God manifested to those called “His own.” It is absolutely imperative that we understand the greatness of Christ’s love – a love to the end; a love to the uttermost along with the greatness of Christ’s person – according to verse 3, **“that the Father had given all things into [Jesus’] hands, and that He had come forth from God and [here is the key] was going back to God.”**

Here was perfect, holy, awesome, undiminished deity – God – the supreme Being, the Self-existent One – **“in the flesh.”** The Creator of heaven and earth; the One with power over the elements; who calmed the storms; healed the sick; turned water into wine; raised the dead; and the One with the authority to forgive sins knowing that He Himself would pay the price for those sins; the God-man; eternal, immortal and almighty – in the presence of this rag-tag, currently self-serving; self-exalting rather ignorant group of men known as His disciples; men, who as we pointed out last week – had been arguing about who was the greatest among them and who among them would have the greatest positions in the coming kingdom of God (Luke 22:24ff) while in fact missing the very greatness, the very beauty the very glory of Him who was in their midst.

It is this Incarnate God – this Deity in the flesh, that gets up from supper according to verse 4, lays aside His garments and dons the garb of a slave in order to graphically illustrate to these prideful; self-consumed men the already declared truth of Matthew 20:26-28 –

26 It is not this way among you [lording over people], but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, 27 and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.

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Here we see the serving Savior. According to Jesus here – greatness is not to be measured by how many people serve you but rather by how many people you yourself serve. And so, what we are to learn from these opening verses in John 13 is that service is love made visible. That Jesus – God in the flesh - would show His love to His disciples by serving them – not simply by washing their dirty, stinking feet; but what the washing of their feet pictured – the humble, sacrificial and utterly costly washing of their sinful and ugly hearts by His death, His service to them [and to us] on the cross. In this foot-washing scene we must see that service is love made visible and from verses 3-11 I would offer to you three expressions of this serving love of Jesus:

- I. It is a condescending love (13:3-7)
- II. It is a cleansing love (13:8)
- III. It is a complete love (13:9-11)

Let us explore then these three expressions of the serving love of Christ:

I. It is a condescending love (13:4-7)

3 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, 4 got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. 5 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. 6 So He came to Simon Peter. He said to Him, "Lord, do You wash my feet?" 7 Jesus answered and said to him, "What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter."

Now – we have already laid the groundwork for this first point. Remember that the clear point of John by stating in verse 1 that Jesus knew **“that He would depart out of this world to the Father”** and in verse 3 that Jesus knew **“that He had come forth from God and was going back to God”** is meant to show us His splendor, majesty, pre-existence and divinity. So then, when the eternal God who is now in the flesh gets up and clothes Himself like a lowly slave to the silent shame of the disciples in order to wash their feet – we must not miss the point. This was shocking; this was scandalous; this was unprecedented in the minds of the disciples. Remember that their discussion had been who was going to be the greatest among them in the kingdom. They had misunderstood the mission of Messiah. They saw Him as a conquering King who was going to lead a rebellion against Rome and all the religious politicians of their time. To them, Jesus was to be hailed; Jesus was to be honored; Jesus was to be served and in turn, because of their relationship to Him, they thought that they too would be served – not by Jesus; for He was the dignified King, but by those whom Jesus would subdue. They did not understand that here at Jesus' first coming, He did not come to rout Rome, but to rescue sinners. He did not come at this time to rule in Jerusalem but to reconcile hearts to God. And how would He reconcile hearts to God? – by doing something even more despicable than performing the slavish task of washing feet, but by performing the humiliating, gory, and cursed task of hanging on a tree; of serving His people as their substitute, their sacrificial lamb in order that their hearts and lives might be atoned for and made right with God.

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With this background we can make better sense out of both the actions of Jesus and the reactions of Peter in verses 6-11. It would appear from verse 5 that Jesus had either washed all of the other disciples' feet or at least several of them by the time He got to Peter. This shocked group of disciples did not know what to do or what to say. But as many of you know, Peter was seldom at a loss for words and was determined to say something once Jesus got to him. And what Peter said is absolutely emphatic in the Greek text saying in verse 6, **“Lord, do You Yourself wash my feet!”** In other words, “Jesus, You are the King, how could you lower Yourself to do such a task. Don't you know who You are? Come on Jesus, get up, You're embarrassing Yourself. You're embarrassing me. You are too good for this! This is so far beneath You.” Okay, so that is a rather amplified version, but I hope you get the point. Peter was incredulous; he could not believe what he was seeing Jesus do. How could Jesus condescend; stoop so low?

And so, in response to Peter's ignorance, Jesus says in verse 7, **“What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter.”** In other words, “Peter, be quiet, trust Me, I know what I am doing; be patient and know that what I do here is a picture, a lesson for you that will all make sense shortly.” Jesus pictures here condescending love. He is seeking the highest good for Peter and the disciples even as they find it hard to understand; hard to believe. The condescending love of Jesus – doing for His own what His own cannot comprehend at first; what His own do not appreciate at first and even what His own question at first.

How many of you have ever found yourself asking the question, “Why did Jesus save me from my sins?” If we have a good understanding of what the Bible teaches concerning the sinfulness of man, the rebellious nature of man against God and man's inability to find God on his own or even to please God in himself, then the question of why would God save me becomes ever present in our minds. What is there in me that would attract God? [pause] Nothing. According to Romans 3:12, **“all have turned aside, together they have become useless...”** So why would God want me? Why would God want you? Why would God condescend, stoop down, lower Himself for me? The answer is – love; God's condescending love that plucks us out of the muck and the mire of sin; a love that, as we will come to see, washes that muck and mire off of us, a love that imparts or imputes the very nature, character and righteousness of Christ to us.

Consider again and afresh in light of this the words of Jesus from John 15:13, **“Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down [lay aside; in essence - condescends] his life for his friend.”** We may not fully understand this love, but it is the love that was made visible by Jesus' death on the cross for the sins of His people. The foot-washing was just a picture of this work of Christ on the cross.

And by way of application, what does this condescending love of Jesus mean to us who profess to be its recipients? I would say two things to you. First, let us be reminded of how great is this love of Jesus for “His own” for we who believe. Let us never find ourselves thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think or more lowly of Christ than we ought to think. May the words of the hymn be ever on our lips,

Upon that cross of Jesus, mine eyes at times can see –

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*The very dying form of One who suffered there for me;
And from my smitten heart with tears two wonders I confess –
The wonders of redeeming love and my unworthiness.*

Elizabeth C. Clephane

The second application I would draw your attention to is to your own personal practice of condescending love. As we will see from John 13, the purpose of this humble service of Christ was to be an example to us (13:15). Too often I fear we as believers can consider ourselves too good, too holy, too important, too pure to be bothered with loving the unlovely; of living out the condescending love of Jesus before those who disbelieve, who maybe despise or reject us because of our faith in Christ. How easily and how quickly we forget that even as unbelievers are now, so too were we once. This was the exhortation of Paul to Titus, reminding him to preach this to his people:

3 For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. 4 But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, 5 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy [condescending love].. (I know there is more to the verse and will come back to it shortly).

Where every unbeliever is now, each one of us at some level or another who professes Christ have been. And each believer is to manifest the love of Christ, the condescending love of Christ to others. So I ask you, are there people you have refused, rejected or neglected to show the love of Christ to? Have you revealed the love of Christ to your neighbors, co-workers, even to strangers on the street or in the store? Someone revealed the great love of Christ to you and now you are responsible to reveal that love to others. They may not understand it now, even as Peter didn't, but it may well be used later by God to bring a greater understanding and salvation. Let us rejoice in and practice the condescending love of Christ.

II. It is a cleansing love (13:8)

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.”

The next part of the exchange between Peter and Jesus that expresses the serving love of Christ is found in verse 8 and reveals this serving love of Jesus as a cleansing love. [Read Text].

Obviously Peter does not yet get it. Moving from a puzzled question in verse 6, he now makes one of those rash and bold statements for which he becomes famous. I know that at first glance this appears somewhat humble and admirable. If Jesus is King and so much above such a menial task like foot washing, then how could Peter or any of the disciples let Him do it? But not only is this a statement, but in effect Peter presumes here to tell Jesus what He can and cannot do saying in effect, “There is no way that I could allow You to wash my feet! You've got it

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perfectly wrong Jesus. This is unworthy of a King!” Perhaps at this point many of the other disciples were nodding and murmuring in agreement.

And here we see in effect the pride of man. Peter would much rather have washed the feet of Jesus (even though he didn't) than to allow Jesus to wash his own feet. This reminds us that in our fallen humanity we resist the suggestion and the need for divine cleaning. We can tend to believe that we are capable in ourselves of reform, of making ourselves presentable to God. And here in Peter's case, not only does he refuse the cleansing, but is presuming that he is capable of serving Jesus without such a divine cleansing. Some of you may be here today at church because you think by it you are making yourself presentable to God. Some of you know people who think if they just make a few changes in their life, apart from the cleansing of Jesus, which this foot-washing is simply a picture, that they will be okay with God and able to serve God.

But, as we see the response of Jesus to Peter, nothing could be further from the truth. These next words of Christ, must have pierced the disciples' heart like a dagger; words they would not have expected to hear as Jesus, with the same kind of emphasis Peter had used, says, **“If I [Myself –by Myself] do not wash you, you have no part with Me.”** What Jesus means is this, “Peter, do you presume to tell Me what I must do. Do you presume to know My ways and My purposes? Do you think you can really be right apart from what I alone must do for you?” This was not about the work of Peter, but about the work of Christ. Again, this whole foot-washing scene was meant to picture the sacrificial and atoning work of Jesus on the cross. If Peter would not allow Jesus to do this physical washing, which was to picture a spiritual washing, then Jesus says to him that there is no connection, there no communion between the two of them. As we will see in a moment, there is a difference between this washing here in verse 8 and the bathing in verse 9. The word for “wash” speaks of simply washing a part of the body, like the feet. If Jesus was “not allowed” to wash Peter's feet, it would be an indication that Peter was rejecting the service and work of Christ on his behalf. It would be an indication that Peter was too proud to let Christ do this work for him. It would be saying to Jesus, “I trust You...mostly, but I can take care of the rest.” Such an attitude expresses an independent spirit that is not to be in the character of a disciple. Remember that Jesus would soon say to them all in John 15:6, **“apart from Me you can do nothing.”**

And so, Jesus is informing His disciples, especially proud Peter, that the love with which He loves them is a cleansing love, a love, as we will see that not only saves them eternally, but also daily sanctifies them. As a believer in Jesus Christ daily treads the sin-infested streets of this life, he or she will need to have their feet washed, will need the removing of all stains and influences of this world that might otherwise diminish their testimonies. And just what is to be the testimony of the believer? That he has a part in Jesus – that He abides, lives and dwells in Jesus. Coming to Jesus for a spiritual cleansing from the daily effects that sin exerts on our lives is the only means to let our light shine all the brighter for Jesus. The love of Jesus is a cleansing love.

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III. It is a complete love (13:9-11)

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

10 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.” 11 For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, “Not all of you are clean.”

This then brings us to our final consideration this morning regarding the expressions of love by the serving Savior. In verses 9-11 we find it to be a complete love.

Again, our point starts with a statement by Peter. He does not yet quite understand what it is Jesus is doing, but he certainly is getting closer. If it is true that unless there is a daily washing, a daily connection to Jesus we have no part in Jesus, then Peter exclaims in verse 9, **“then wash not only my feet, but also my hands and my head.”** It is as if Peter is still stuck on the picture rather than the reality. For in truth, no amount of water would ever wash away sin. The allowing of Jesus to wash his feet was simply to be an expression of his faith in the truth that by the sacrifice of Jesus, by the blood of Jesus, he would be truly bathed, truly fit for heaven.

And so, once again Jesus addresses Peter and the disciples making this distinction between the washing of feet and being bathed. [Read verse 10]. Jesus is using another analogy to make His point. When a person bathed in the first century, it was often in a bathhouse. After bathing the whole body, the person would have to walk back to the house, during which time his feet may get dirty. Upon arrival at the house, the person did not bath his entire body again, but rather simply washed his feet. Perhaps some of you might relate to this if you have ever been camping. At one place where we have camped, you walked up to the bathhouse, usually, for me, wearing sandals. Once bathed, I would walk back to the tent, sometimes through the dirt or sand. Back at the tent, I might note I had dirty feet and would have to wipe them off before entering the tent. I certainly would not feel compelled to go all the way back to the bathhouse to wash my entire body again.

And here then is the point. These disciples, save for one, all had expressed a faith in Jesus. It was not a fully informed faith, but it was not deficient for salvation. At some level or another, these disciples had trusted Jesus to be the Messiah, come to redeem them and by this faith, they were truly believers, all except one. Having believed, Jesus says by way of analogy, they are fully bathed. Their faith has completely cleansed them, so says verse 10. But this salvation does not result in being untouchable by the dirt and grim of sin on the outside. Inwardly they are clean, but they will need to have their feet, which I take to be symbolic of their walk, their living, to be washed. And the beauty is that once a person has genuine faith in Jesus and His humble, sacrificial death for his sins, there is nothing that changes that inward cleansing. In fact, there is no other cleansing available. Jesus is the only way, the only means by which we might be washed and cleansed. Remember I told you we would go back to Titus 3. Let us read those verses again and see how Paul describes this complete cleansing.

Titus 3:3-7

3 For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. 4 But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, 5 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His

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mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

This washing, regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ results in what? It results in being justified, made right with God; and it results in being made heirs of eternal life. Nothing can change this because it was not put into effect by us, but by Christ. It is a complete and eternal cleansing. Do you believe that? Do you rejoice in that? Have you really trusted in this cleansing alone, this complete cleansing, this full bath in the righteousness of Christ? You may well say yes – but how then do you know? Let me ask you – do you come to Jesus daily for the washing of your feet? The one who knows he has been completely bathed, knows that he need not be bathed again, but he does know there will be places he has walked that soil the feet of his life. Do you come to Jesus, confessing sin regularly (1 John 1:9)? According the book of 1 John, written of course by the Apostle John, the same one who recorded the events of John 13 reminds his readers that those who confess sin regularly (1 John 1:9); who seek to walk even as Jesus walked (1 John 2:6); who strives not to practice sin (1 John 3:9); who loves others even as God has loved us (1 John 4:7-11); this is the person who knows he has been fully, completely bathed, who has a part with Christ and who understand the greatness of love of Christ for him, a love that condescended to him; a love that cleanses him daily; a love that is complete and will bring him to eternal life. Do you know this love of Christ? I pray it be so. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

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