

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 20, 2010**

## **LESSONS FROM THE TOWEL AND THE BASIN**

### **John 13:1-17**

Sometimes actions really do speak louder than words, don't they? And sometimes words are necessary to make sure we don't miss the meaning of the action. In this passage in John 13, we see Jesus in action, teaching Peter and the rest of the disciples an unforgettable lesson which was at the same time both spiritual and practical. If we look carefully, we can learn something important about Jesus, about Peter, and about our own lives as we seek to live as followers of Christ today.

Let's begin with what this passage tells us about Jesus.

#### **1. JESUS**

The first thing we notice about Jesus is that He knew what time it was. I don't mean that He constantly checked His watch or cell phone to see what time it was. I mean that He understood the plan and purposes of the Father, and He knew that the Passover feast – *this* Passover – was God's appointed time for Him to fulfill His redemptive work as the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world (John 1:29). Jesus knew, as it says in verse 1, that "the time had come for Him to leave this world and go (back) to the Father."

In the Greek language there are two words for "time." One is the word *chronos*, which has to do with time as we ordinarily think of it – chronological time. The other word, *kairos*, has a special meaning. It refers to a moment in time of great significance. A *kairos* moment is a defining moment with ripple effects that would influence the direction and future of an individual, a nation, or an entire race. Jesus understood that the *kairos* moment of all *kairos* moments – the defining moment of all defining moments – was about to happen. The cross was on the horizon. It was time for Him, as He said in John 10:15, to "lay down (His) life for the sheep" – for all who by faith belong to the flock of His followers. It was time for Him to give His life "as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10) – to make us "at one" with God. The *kairos* moment had arrived.

Jesus also knew what was going on in the heart of Judas. In verse 2, it says that "the devil had already prompted Judas ... to betray Jesus." That Judas was the one who would betray Him did not come as a surprise to Jesus. He knew what was going on in Judas' heart (just as He knows at this very moment what is going on in your heart and mine). He knew what Judas was plotting to do. And He knew the Father would use it as part of His redemptive plan.

The second thing to notice about Jesus is the love He had for His disciples. The last part of verse 1 says: "Having loved His own who were in the world, He now showed them the full extent of His love."

How did Jesus show “the full extent of His love”? Not simply by washing their feet. Even more, He showed the full extent of His love for us all by going to the cross, an innocent man taking on the punishment and penalty we deserve.

Hymnwriter Isaac Watts asked the question:

Was it for crimes that I have done  
He bled upon the tree?

Yes, it was. It was for the sins I have done – and you have done – that Jesus suffered and died on the cross. As Peter says in 1 Peter 2:24, “He bore our sins in His body on the tree” to set us free from the power of sin and guilt so that we might live instead for Him and His glory.

Amazing pity! Grace unknown!  
And love beyond degree!

Love beyond degree. Love without limits. That is the love Jesus has for you and me. It is the love Jesus had for His disciples as He prepared to go to the cross.

“Love beyond degree,” even though, as one Bible expositor (J. Glyn Owen) points out, these men had been difficult to teach and lead from the very beginning. What they learned one day, they forgot the next.

Their foibles and follies and failures were too numerous to mention. If any of us had been their leader, we might have felt nothing but disappointment in them at this point. But Jesus loved them and cared about them from the depths of His soul. He had poured His life into them, because He loved them.

Nothing they could do would cause Him to stop loving them, or keep Him from loving them to the end. And the same is true for you and me. Nothing you do, or fail to do, will change the fact that *Jesus* loves you. Jesus *loves* you. Jesus loves *you*. And He will love you to the end.

The third thing to notice is that Jesus knew who was in charge, where He had come from, and where He was going. Look at verse 3: “Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under His power, and that He had come from God and was returning to God.”

Jesus understood His own sovereignty. He knew that the Father had given Him authority over all things. He was conscious of His own lordship. In other words, He knew who He was – who He *is*. In addition, He was aware of both His origin (He had come from God) and His destiny (He was going to return to God).

If someone were to ask Jesus where He was from, He could have said: “I was born in Bethlehem” or “I grew up in Nazareth.” But, because He knew who He was, He knew He had come from heaven itself. He knew He had left the Father’s throne above in order to die for Adam’s helpless race. And He knew where He was going. He knew He was returning to

heaven. He knew His ultimate destiny was the place of greatest honor in heaven at the right hand of the Father, and that He will one day come again in unimaginable glory, to judge the living and the dead.

Knowing that Jesus is in charge, knowing that He came from heaven in order to save us and returned to heaven when He had completed His mission here on earth, can give us a sense of peace and hope that nothing life throws at us can defeat, as we trust in Him moment by moment.

The fourth thing to notice is what Jesus actually did during supper in the upper room. It was, of course, the last supper for Jesus before His crucifixion. While Jesus and the disciples were reclining on couches, lying on their left sides with their heads near the table, Jesus got up from His place at the table, removed His robe, and wrapped a towel around His waist, just as a household servant would do. Then He poured water into a basin and began to go around the table, washing the feet of His stunned disciples, and drying them with the towel (13:4-5).

In itself, washing the feet of dinner guests was not unusual. In fact, it was proper etiquette. It was both a matter of hygiene or cleanliness, given the fact that feet would get dirty and smelly from wearing sandals out on dusty roads or paths, and of hospitality. It was a way of extending a welcome to guests. It was usually the job of a servant to wash the feet of guests as they entered a home. On this occasion, though, there were no servants present in the upper room.

Not a single one of the disciples volunteered to do it. Not a single one stepped forward to wash the feet of the others. Any of them would have been more than happy to do it for Jesus – to wash His feet as a sign of their respect for and allegiance to Him (though no one did). But to wash the feet of their fellow disciples? That was out of the question.

You see, the disciples were embroiled in a rivalry with one another, a competition about which of them was greatest in the kingdom of God. To assume the role and posture of a servant would be seen as a sign of humiliation and an admission of inferiority to the other disciples. None of them – not Peter, not James, not John, nor any of the others – could bring themselves to do it. It just wasn't happening.

But what none of them would do, the eternal Son of God, God in the flesh, the Savior who had come from the Father and was returning to the Father, in full consciousness of His own eternal deity and glory, was ready and willing to do.

What Jesus did is a living example of what Paul said of Him in Philippians 2:6-7:

Though He was in very nature God – truly and fully God,  
He willingly humbled Himself and set His glory aside,  
Taking the form of a servant  
And being made in human likeness.

F. F. Bruce says that the form of God was not *exchanged for* the form of a servant in the coming of Jesus, it was *revealed in* the form of a servant.

As Jesus Himself said to His disciples that same night in the upper room in Luke 22:27: “I am among you as the one who serves.” And in Mark 10:45: “The Son of Man (the title by which Jesus often referred to Himself) did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”

## **2. JESUS AND PETER**

There in the upper room, Jesus took on the role of a servant and began washing the feet of His disciples. But it provoked a strong reaction of protest from Peter. Look at this dialogue between the two of them.

First, in verse 6, Peter expresses a kind of confused surprise: “Lord, *You* are going to wash *my* feet?” Peter recognizes that there is something wrong with this picture. He knows instinctively that the roles should be reversed. He is the one who should be washing the feet of the Master. And he is embarrassed to have Jesus wash his feet – or the feet of any of the disciples.

In reply, in verse 7, Jesus hints that there is more going on than Peter realizes. There is a deeper, spiritual significance to what Jesus is doing.

But Peter is not buying it. In the strongest terms (verse 8a), he refuses to let Jesus wash his feet. He says: “No way! Never! It is *not* going to happen! I will *not* let you do it!”

Jesus, however, does not accept Peter’s refusal. He says in the second part of verse 8: “If you don’t let me do it, you will have no fellowship with me.”

That gets Peter’s attention. It strikes fear into his heart, because Peter, after three years as a close friend and follower of Jesus, cannot imagine life cut off from fellowship with his Master and Friend. So Peter does an immediate about-face. He says in verse 9: “Then not just my feet, but all of me. If washing my feet is necessary to have fellowship with you, Lord, don’t stop there. Wash all of me so nothing will get in the way of our relationship.”

Peter doesn’t understand yet (and we probably wouldn’t have either), so in verse 10, Jesus explains the spiritual meaning of what He has just done: “If you’ve had a bath, you only need to wash your feet in order to be clean.”

Peter and the rest of the disciples had already taken a bath earlier in the day. When they gathered in the upper room, they didn’t need another bath. They simply needed to have their feet washed to remove the dust and dirt which had accumulated from the travels of the day. That is the reason for the custom of foot-washing.

The spiritual meaning or application is this: The bath refers to the cleansing from sin in salvation. Paul expresses it this way in Titus 3:5-6: “He (God) saved us through the washing

of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.” This washing is a symbol of our cleansing from sin and guilt through the blood of Jesus.

The one who has had this bath has been born again and is justified in God’s sight. If you have been born again by the Spirit of God, you don’t have to be born again, again and again and again. You are born again only once. The cleansing of salvation does not need to be repeated. But we still need to have our “feet” washed from the daily dust and dirt and contaminating effects of sin. The bath refers to salvation, which is a one-time event. The foot-washing refers to our need for a daily cleansing from sin and its effects. Apart from this, we will not enjoy the blessing of ongoing fellowship with the Savior.

Reflecting on what took place in the upper room, Origen, a third-century church leader, prayed this prayer: “Jesus, my feet are dirty. Come even as a slave to me, pour water into your bowl, come and wash my feet. In asking such a thing I know I am overbold, but I dread what was threatened when you said to me, ‘If I do not wash your feet I have no fellowship with you.’ Wash my feet then, because I long for your companionship.” If you, like Origen and Peter, desire the fellowship or companionship of the Savior in your life, come to Him daily – or more often, whenever you have a consciousness of sin – to have the dust and dirt and mud and toxins of sin washed from your feet.

That is the spiritual meaning of Jesus’ act of servitude.

### **3. SERVE ONE ANOTHER**

But there is another, more obvious meaning. In case they somehow missed it, Jesus gives the practical application beginning in verse 12. It is really very simple, at least in principle. Jesus says: “If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, what should you do?”

Our first instinct might be to think that Jesus wants us to do for *Him* what He has done for *us*. In other words, since He washed the feet of the disciples, the disciples should wash *His* feet. But that is not what Jesus says.

What He says is: “I want you to do *for one another* what I have done for you. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (verse 15). It is the example of humble service. Jesus washed the feet of His disciples as an example of how they (and we) are to serve one another with a spirit of humility, without worrying about who is the most important or what other people will think.

The lesson was not just for His disciples. The lesson is for us, too. Life is about love. The most important thing in life is to love God with your whole being, and to love others as Jesus loved you. Life is about love. And love is best expressed in service.

I read about a church which has only one door leading into and out of the sanctuary. Above the door is a sign that says: SERVANT’S ENTRANCE. The only way in or out is through the servants’ door.

#### **4. THE BLESSING**

To serve one another in love – to serve one another with *God's* love – is a central part of your mission in life. And mine. So we need to be on the lookout for ways – simple ways, humble ways – we can serve one another, or others whom God puts in our lives.

Waiting for a flight at the Atlanta airport, Brennan Manning decided to get his shoes shined. An elderly African-American man began to shine his shoes, and Manning had this feeling that after the man was done, he should pay him and give him a tip, and then reverse the roles. So, when the man was done, Manning stood up and said: “Now, sir, I would like to shine *your* shoes.”

The man said: “You’re going to do what?”

“I’d like to shine your shoes. Come on. You sit down here. How would you like them done?”

The man began to cry. He said: “No white man ever talked to me like this before.”

The story ends with these two men – an elderly African-American and a white Christian author – with their arms around each other and tears flowing freely.

Notice what Jesus said in verse 17: “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” Do you want to be blessed? Do you want to receive the blessing? The blessing is in the doing. It is not enough to know what God wants us to do. It is not enough to teach others what God wants us all to do. The blessing is in the doing.

Brennan Manning and his new friend at the Atlanta airport both received a blessing. May you too be blessed as you serve others. Just like Jesus did.

Lord, let it be so. Amen.