

July 22, 2012

# *Living Out The Gospel In Real Life*

## *To Get High, Go Low*

**John 13:1 – 20**

In John 13, Jesus' crucifixion and death was just hours away. But He had one last teaching session with His disciples that lasts for the next five chapters – all the way through chapter 17. And in this last session we hear some really profound stuff, so it may take us a bit longer to get through it all than Jesus took on His last night before the cross. But what is really profound is His initial discourse, combined with a visual lesson in the middle of supper. And that is what we'll focus on this morning. It is a simple teaching – but a difficult teaching. It is simple because it is one little thought that is really the heart and soul of Christian living – but that makes it difficult as well. You see the problem is that we have been brainwashed from birth by the very nature of sin, and we need our minds renewed to the truth. Jesus knew that, that's why, after He gave the living illustration of the teaching, He had to ask the question, 'Do you understand what I have done to you? Do you get it yet? Do you know what this means? Do you see the implications of this?' And those are exactly the questions we need to ask ourselves this morning – Do I understand what Jesus was doing? And how does that impact my life?

The disciples and Jesus have gathered together in a house to celebrate the Passover. [Picture] And John sets the scene: *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.* John 13:1 What John is trying to convey here I think is the awesome, self-sacrificing, unconditional, intentional love of Christ for His own. Over the rest of the next five chapters, flies the banner of Christ's love for His own. This is not to deny John's word in chapter three that He loves the world, He does. But this is a unique and special love. It is like saying, 'I love people – but I love my wife in a way that I don't love everyone else'. That's unique – that's special. And in saying this, John is setting the scene for the rest of this teaching. That is, Jesus is going to say something about this love, what it looks like, how it is expressed.

The first thing it looks like is that it is a **love that is enduring** and lasting and goes all the way to the end. It is a love that spares no expense – doesn't quit because it suffers – doesn't stop because it is insulted – doesn't melt away because it isn't returned in kind. It is sacrificial, unconditional, intentional love. Every step that Jesus took on His way to the cross was because of love. His love is long and His love is deep. And nothing can ever separate us from that love. Paul breaks out in pentecostal fervor when he begins talking about this love: *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Romans 8:35-39

This love doesn't stop half-way either. It goes all the way to the end. What was Jesus saying here? When he said that Jesus loved His own all the way to the end, I believe John had in mind the cross. This is John the author writing about the event after it happened and he knew where this was headed. He was saying in effect 'This love took Jesus to the cross and all the coming torture and insult and indignities of the cross weren't enough to cancel it out. His love for us compelled Him to go all the way. And then by way of implication, one of the things he was telling us was that just as His love for us took Him all the way to the cross; **His love for us will see us all the way through to glory.** This love will do whatever is necessary in our lives to see us safely through to the end. Nothing will ultimately be able to separate us from His love. So remember, in everything that follows, this banner flies over it all: *having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.*

Then John goes on to describe what happened. *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.* John 13:2-4a I could probably give a whole sermon on Judas but I won't; I'll just say what my father used to tell me -'Your life can either serve as a warning or example' and his was definitely not an example. But John deliberately contrasts the self-sacrificing and unconditional love of Christ with the self-serving and conditional love Judas displayed. And it provides a vivid backdrop to what is coming.

John tells us that the devil had already put something into the heart of Judas and it was not as though Judas was this innocent guy that had the bad luck to run into the devil. Satan doesn't take innocent people captive – he has power where sinful passions rule. Judas loved power – he controlled the purse strings; and Judas loved money – he used to pilfer what was in the bag. This was no spur of the moment thing for him. He'd been following the devil, pretending to follow Jesus. And John deliberately contrasts the heart of Judas with the heart of Christ's love – they are diametrically opposed. Jesus came to serve – Judas loved being served. Jesus emptied Himself – Judas was always trying to magnify himself. Jesus was humble – Judas had a raging pride. John gives us this contrast because **what this passage shows us is what being a Christian is all about**. It is one of the clearest explanations of the greatest commandment – **Love God supremely and love your neighbor as yourself**.

In Luke, when the lawyer asked Jesus, 'What is the greatest commandment?' he was really asking, 'What is the one main thing that defines a God-follower? How you know if you are really saved?' Jesus answered '*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself*'. And Matthew adds that He commented on this by saying, '*On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets*.' In other words – **everything depends on this** – this is the heart and soul of the Christian faith – know this, get this, everything depends on understanding this. *Love God supremely – love your neighbor as yourself*. If you boil it all down – this is what it looks like. It must be both – no one can really see you loving God – but what they can see is that you are loving your neighbor. There is a visible expression of an invisible attitude. You cannot love God supremely without at the same time, in the same way loving your neighbor as yourself.

So Jesus gets up from the table and proceeds to give them an object lesson: *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*. John 13:4b-5 In one sense, everything else Jesus would say flows from this – this is the starting point – this is what they really needed to understand. Think about it. They had to have been shocked – this was a job for slaves. Even Jewish slaves couldn't be compelled to wash someone's feet – you had to get a Gentile slave to do that because that was disgusting – that was demeaning. And here you had the rabbi, the teacher, the master, get up, wrap a towel around His waist and start washing their feet. But more than that, this was not just a rabbi – this was the Master of the Universe bending low to wash His student's feet.

Now for a moment, jump down to verse 12. We'll leave Peter's response to this astonishing scene for a moment and focus on what Jesus meant to say by doing this. *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?"* John 13:12 John only records what Peter's reaction was, but I can imagine that they all had similar reactions to this strange event. I see their deer-in-the-headlights look as Jesus gets done and sits down again and says, 'Do you know what just happened?' And the question was so rhetorical that John doesn't record that anybody had anything to say. I don't think Jesus thought anyone knew the answer – He just sets the scene for the teaching.

And this is what He says: *You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am*. John 13:13 'I know what you're thinking' He says. 'Washing feet is not the thing an earthly teacher or Lord does – but I am all that and you know it'. *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*. John 13:14-15 In other words, 'This is how you do it – this is what it means to be a follower of Me. This is what the Christian life is all about. When you boil it down – this is what comes out'.

You see, we have it all so backwards. The Christian life is often said to be a paradox. And a paradox defined is a seeming contradiction that nevertheless is true. But Christianity is only a paradox because we've been brainwashed from birth to believe the lie. **You see, Christianity says that we have to lose our lives to find them; that we have to die to live; that we have to surrender to win; we must become poor to become rich; be brought low to be brought high; become the least to become the greatest**. And we think those are paradoxes. But they are only paradoxes if you take the world's definition of what it means to be a fully-orbed human. But Jesus was always hammering home that the kingdom way of thinking was directly opposed to the world's idea of success and fulfillment and joy.

We see that in Peter's reaction to the foot washing: *He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do You wash my feet?"* John 13:6 I'm not surprised that John only records Peter's reaction here, after all he is the disciple with the foot-shaped mouth – he was always putting his foot in it. In effect Peter was saying, 'You're not really going to stoop that low and wash my feet are you?' And: *Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand."* John 13:7 In other words, 'Peter, you don't know your real condition – you don't understand your real need here.' And still Peter didn't get it: *Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet."* John 13:8a Peter was not only reacting to what he saw as the inappropriate, shameful, and even insulting sight of his Master washing his feet; he was also expressing the kind of thought that many people have today. Peter doesn't realize his need – he doesn't fully appreciate that he needs a foot washing Savior – he needs a dying Savior. 'What are you doing down there?' Peter says. 'Come on, get up – don't wash my feet'.

On one hand Peter is objecting to the clear example Jesus is giving of what it means to be a Christian. **A Christian is one who goes low.** The love of Christ is demonstrated not by lording it over people or magnifying your worth or by insisting that others defer to you. A Christian is one who takes the way of humility and lowliness. Jesus was their teacher, their rabbi, their master, their Lord – and here He is, having loved His own, kneeling before them like the lowest of slaves to wash their dirty feet. That was repugnant to Peter. That's not how the Messiah ought to act. He should be sitting and they should be washing His feet – not Him theirs. By the standards of the world He should be the one being served. In fact the ordinary standards of the world mitigate against going low. But the ordinary standards of the world are not the standards of the kingdom. In the kingdom of God it is the high serving the low, not the other way around. *'...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.'* **Matthew 20:28**

Luke gives us a little more insight into what was going on in that room, and in light of this it makes complete sense for Jesus to take some time and give these guys an object lesson. Right in the middle of their time together that last night Luke tells us: *And there arose also a dispute among them as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest.* Luke 22:24 Jesus was headed to death and these guys were arguing over who was the greatest. But they didn't understand yet that in the kingdom, the one who is regarded as the highest is the one who has gone the lowest. So Jesus gives them the kingdom view of greatness: *"...but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant. For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves."* Luke 22:26-27 And it may have been at that point that Jesus gets the towel and the water and proceeds to wash their feet.

**A Christian is someone who knows he needs cleansing.** But Peter was objecting to the idea that he might be dirty and his reaction here mirrors the thought that is prevalent today: **I'm not that bad and God's not that mad.** A lot of people secretly have this idea that we haven't really been bad enough for God to send His Son to die for us and they find that thought rather insulting. *'What do you mean I'm not good enough?'* And then Jesus tells him, *'If I don't do this, you are in the same class as Judas – You are not mine. Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with Me."* Was Jesus saying that simply by not washing his feet that Peter would be lost, like Judas? Was this foot washing thing so important in and of itself? And the answer is of course not. But Peter now seems to realize the deeper significance of this event: *Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"* John 13:9 In typical Peter fashion, Peter goes whole hog here – 'If that's the case, don't just wash my feet – give me a bath!'

And Jesus responds in a very curious way: *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."* John 13:10-11 What's He saying here? If you take a bath, presumably you're going to wash your feet as well as the rest of you. But here Jesus is making a distinction between bathing and foot washing. So what's He saying? Here's what I think is going on: Jesus says, 'No Peter – this isn't about bathing – you are already clean – except one of you – Judas. Judas the betrayer is the exception here. The eleven are clean – they've bathed – that is they have believed on Jesus – they are His sheep – they have eternal life – they are completely clean – saved and justified to use New Testament language – only Judas is excluded. *I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, 'He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.' I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am He.* John 13:18-19

And that is true of everyone who believes in Christ – completely clean – saved and forgiven and justified eternally. But when Jesus says, '**The one who has bathed is clean except for his feet**' He is referring to our daily need for our feet to be washed. He is talking about **our need for daily confession and repentance of sin** and turning to Jesus for the ongoing application of what He accomplished on the cross. When we walk through the world our feet get dirty – our conscience gets defiled – we commit sins of omission and commission – we need daily cleansing and forgiveness – and Christ's once-for-all purchase of our forgiveness needs daily application.

And if we insist that we don't need that or want that, then we demonstrate that we have not been bathed – we are not saved, that we've not been completely cleansed. The mark of true followers of Christ is that they hate their sin, they hate their daily shortcomings and come to Christ for daily cleansing. On the other hand, those who don't know Him are too proud to admit they're dirty. They don't sin – sure they've made mistakes but they don't think they are bad enough to be eternally punished. They are not that bad and God is not that mad and the idea that God's wrath against sin would break over their heads is utterly repugnant and distasteful to them. And those who don't know Him would never stoop to wash someone else's feet. They're too proud – too arrogant to do something like that. They're too high to go that low.

But Jesus told His disciples that He did what He did so that they would do the same to each other. That they would remind each other of their daily need for repentance and cleansing and forgiveness – and that they would look to serve – not to be served. That their attitude and thinking would not be corrupted by the world's definition of greatness, but that they would follow His example of true greatness: *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.* John 13:16 In other words, don't think you can call yourself a servant of mine and demand that others serve you. I'm the master and yet I'm serving you – I'm washing **your** feet.

And lest we think that this is some sort of drudgery, some kind of difficult burden we must bear as Christians – we have to be humble, we have to take the low place, we must defer to others – Jesus tells them that this is really the way to joy: *If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.* John 13:17 The word 'blessed' here is one that means happy, glad, joyful. What Jesus is saying is that your **real joy is wrapped up in humble service**. In fact you won't know real joy until you go low. Going low, serving others and giving yourself to them for their good is the most completely joyful, happy, satisfying life there is. We find our greatest pleasures not in when people are singing our praises, but when they are helped by us in our service. Jesus is giving His followers a high call to be His representatives: *Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.*" John 13:20 And the kind of people who accurately and faithfully represent Jesus are the ones who joyfully go low in service. The kind of love that comes from God is an other-centered love. If we truly love God supremely, we will love our neighbor as ourselves.

A large group of European pastors came to one of D. L. Moody's Northfield Bible Conferences in Massachusetts in the late 1800s. Following the European custom of the time, each guest put his shoes outside his room to be cleaned by the hall servants overnight. But of course this was America and there were no hall servants. Walking the dormitory halls that night, Moody saw the shoes and determined not to embarrass his brothers. He mentioned the need to some ministerial students who were there, but met with only silence or pious excuses. Moody returned to the dorm, gathered up the shoes, and, alone in his room, the world's only famous evangelist began to clean and polish the shoes. The thing about this is that we wouldn't have even known that Moody did this except that a friend of his happened to witness the event, because Moody never spoke of it. And when the foreign visitors opened their doors the next morning, all their shoes were shined and they never know who did it. Moody didn't tell, but his friend told a few people, and during the rest of the conference, different men volunteered to shine the shoes in secret.

I've said this many times, that the best definition of love that I've heard is that **love is the accurate estimation and the adequate supply of another's need**. That's what we see here. *having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.* This is love that is sacrificial, unconditional and intentional. This is the kind of love that goes low. The kind of love that is other-centered, not self-centered. And ultimately the expression of this love leads to the cross. That's what we needed – His sacrifice in our place so that we might be rescued from the chains of sin and death to live eternally with Him.

*Our gracious God and Father,*

*We confess that in so many ways our thinking is regulated by the ordinary wisdom of this age. Renew our minds to the truth of the gospel. We echo what Peter said, 'Lord, not our feet only but also our hands and heads. Wash us thoroughly from the thinking that says it is better to be served than to serve. Give us a servant-hearted passion and grant that we would walk in humility – that we would be ambitious to go low – that we would hate the pride that keeps us from the joy of humble service. Grant us to know and savor the sacrificial, unconditional, intentional love that rescued us from sin and let us live to spread that love through the gospel to all people we pray, in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*