

Unit III: Godly Love among Believers

Upside-down Love

DEVOTIONAL READING: John 15:18–16:4a

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: John 13:1–35

PRINT PASSAGE: John 13:1–15, 34–35

Key Verse—I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.
(John 13:15, KJV)

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“I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.”
(John 13:15, NIV)

Lesson Aims

As a result of experiencing this lesson, you should be able to do these things:

- Consider the significance of Jesus’ washing the disciples’ feet.
- Repent of pride that has prevented your serving selflessly.
- Serve others as an expression of Christian love.

*Key Terms

Disciples (verse 35)—Greek: *mathétés* (math-ay-tes’): learners; pupils; persons who follow another.

Passover (verse 1)—Greek: *pascha* (pas’-khah): the Passover supper; a major springtime holiday observed by Jewish people commemorating God’s delivering the Jewish people out of Egypt.

Wash (verse 5)—Greek: *níptó* (nip’-to): to clean; to wash.

*(Word Study Supplement—Refer to page 2)

Introduction

During His earthly ministry, Jesus would have been branded a radical—a person who advocates thorough or complete political or social reform. In laymen’s terminology, Jesus was someone with extreme views. His stance set Him at odds with the established religious hierarchy. They advocated the letter of the Law and the traditions they had established, while He taught adhering to the spirit of the Law. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7),



The Biblical Context

The gospel of John can be divided into two distinct sections. The first half deals with seven signs/miracles that identified Jesus as God in the flesh. The second half focuses on His substitutionary death and provisions for His church. John 13–17 contains Jesus' farewell message to His disciples and climaxes with His intercessory prayer for them and us. In these chapters, John recorded Jesus' instructions about what His disciples could expect after His death. In chapter 13, he provides three significant events prior to Jesus' death and resurrection: the institution of the Lord's Supper; the washing of the disciples' feet; and His prediction of His betrayal by Judas Iscariot. The washing of the disciples' feet was a sermon in action and was designed to teach and model humility and true servant-leadership.

Jesus taught His disciples that their character and behavior were to be radically different from that of the Pharisees' and scribes'. He taught non-retaliation as opposed to *lex talionis*, the law of tit for tat, in human relations and loving one's enemies. Jesus' doctrine was radically different from commonly accepted behavior under the Law; however, He modeled it with His life and through object lessons. We could say that His sermons were both visible and vocal. In John 13, during His final discourse with His disciples, Jesus modeled the standard for servant-leadership: loving others by serving them. This was an unprecedented concept of love and servanthood. Metaphorically, this concept was like a pineapple upside-down cake where the best is on the bottom, giving the whole its unique flavor. Jesus taught that godly love among His followers be modeled like this, where those who lead do so from the bottom by

serving selflessly and sacrificially in the best interest of others.

ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

A Reversal of Roles (*John 13:1-5*)

KJV

NOW BEFORE the feast of the *passover*, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end.

2 And supper being ended, the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him;

3 Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God, and went to God;

4 He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself.

5 After that he poureth water into a bason, and began to *wash* the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded.

NIV

IT WAS just before the *Passover* Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

2 The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus.

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;

4 so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.

5 After that, he poured water into a basin and began to *wash* his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

Farewells are difficult, especially when they involve being left by or leaving those we love. John 13 begins Jesus' farewell discourse to His disciples before the Passover feast and was designed to prepare them for what they would face without His comforting, physical presence among them. On this fateful night, Jesus was acutely aware that His death and resurrection were imminent. He had come from the Father to die in obedience to His Father's will, and now it was time to return to Him to be glorified. The completion of this mission was the supreme act of love for His own, His disciples (**verse 1**). This love was both for the present and the future. Its full extent would be realized by His death on the Cross. As the supper ended, this night may have been bittersweet, for He knew that Satan had planted the seed of His betrayal in the heart of Judas Iscariot (**verse 2**). However, in His divinity He was also aware that the Father was in control of this phase of His earthly ministry. Knowing that God had given Him sovereignty and authority, where He was from, and His final destiny (**verse 3**), He was able to wash His disciples' feet (**verses 4-5**)—a strong symbol of service to another. In this culture, foot washing was needed because of the dusty streets of Palestine and the type of footwear worn by the people. This task was usually relegated to slaves and was a service provided by hosts for guests in their homes. Failure to provide this service was considered a breach in hospitality. Imagine reclining at the table to eat with dirty, offensive feet! There was no one available to perform this menial task for the disciples, and neither of them was prepared to or had even considered doing it. They had missed His previous admonition that the greatest among them was to be a servant. Most likely, there was surprise and even consternation when the disciples realized that Jesus was about to perform the task of the lowliest of slaves.

This was clearly a reversal of roles and established protocol because not even a Jewish slave would have been asked to do it. Their master was visibly assuming the role of a slave and kneeling before them, washing their soiled feet. His preparatory steps were an additional lesson in themselves. His actions show that His followers, especially leaders,

must divest themselves of self-importance and humbly allow love to motivate them to serve rather than be served. This was also a visible demonstration of His love and affection for His disciples, like that of a wife washing her husband's feet or children washing their parents' feet. This was also a visible rebuke of the prideful ambition of rank seeking that they had just displayed. Christ's standard for servanthood "flips the script." He expects His followers to voluntarily assume the role of servants motivated by a love that seeks the highest good for others despite how they are treated. Remember: Jesus washed Judas's dirty feet too!

Q What Do You Think? How can titles get in the way of humbly serving others?

Misunderstanding and Rejection of Roles (*John 13:6-15*)

KJV

6 Then cometh he to Simon Peter: and Peter saith unto him, Lord, dost thou wash my feet?

7 Jesus answered and said unto him, What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter.

8 Peter saith unto him, Thou shalt never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me.

9 Simon Peter saith unto him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.

10 Jesus saith to him, He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all.

11 For he knew who should betray him; therefore said he, Ye are not all clean.

12 So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you?

13 Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am.

14 If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet.

15 For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.

NIV

6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

7 Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

8 "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

9 "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

10 Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you."

11 For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

12 When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them.

13 "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am.

14 "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.

15 "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."

While the other disciples sat in embarrassed silence, the outspoken Peter was not at a loss for words. He and the others had not fully grasped the role Jesus was to perform while on earth. They were looking for a liberating, military Messiah and not the suffering Servant Messiah. Peter's question reflects this misunderstanding (**verse 6**). Jesus was their master and the divine king. Disciples were expected to wash their masters' feet. Jesus' action was inappropriate protocol and unheard of in Jewish culture. Jesus' reply (**verse 7**) uncovered Peter's ignorance of His purpose for washing their feet but indicated that later he would understand that He had come to serve and willingly give His life as a ransom for many. Peter missed the point because he was still focusing on what he thought was an inappropriate action on Jesus' part. He and the other disciples did not and would not perform this menial task, and Peter vocally forbade his Master to wash his feet (**verse 8a**). Jesus' response to Peter was meant to correct Peter's misunderstanding of Jesus' messianic role and to establish the requirements for a relationship with Him. It is only those who have been spiritually cleansed (washed) by faith who can enjoy an intimate relationship with Him (**verse 8b**).

Peter reasoned that Jesus' washing their feet was the condition for their relationship and desired to be totally washed (**verse 9**). Jesus explained that those who had already bathed did not need to bathe again every time their feet got dirty. They only needed to wash their dirty feet because they are otherwise completely clean (**verse 10**). Jesus was teaching that the spiritual cleansing of the redeemed at salvation does not have to be repeated. All that is needed is the daily cleansing from the defilement of the sin dwelling within. All of them, except the one who was to betray Him, had already experienced the cleansing of forgiveness of sin (**verse 11**). Jesus completed the task of washing their feet and then taught the lesson they were to learn (**verses 12-15**)—humble service motivated by love. He had modeled it and if He could do it, then so could they. He was not instituting a ritual to be continued but was teaching them to humbly serve others. Our salvation is eternally secure, but we need to present our lives to Him daily for the purpose of cleansing so that we become more like Him. It is then that we can obey His command to humbly and lovingly serve others.

Q What Do You Think? Why does the biblical principle of functioning as a servant challenge believers?

A New Kind of Love (*John 13:34-35*)

KJV

34 A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.

35 By this shall all men know that ye are my *disciples*, if ye have love one to another.

NIV

34 “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

35 “By this everyone will know that you are my *disciples*, if you love one another.”

John 13 opened with the message that Jesus deeply loved His disciples and was soon to prove its extent with His death on the Cross (verse 1). He taught them the importance of being humble enough to serve others rather than seeking to be served (verse 16). After unmasking His betrayer, Judas (verses 18-30), Jesus announced again His coming death in terms of His and the Father's glorification. He was preparing to physically leave these eleven men who had been in intimate fellowship with Him for three years. They would not be able to follow Him immediately and thus they were fearful and heavy-hearted. Jesus gave His disciples a charge to follow His example as He faced the supreme sacrifice He was about to make for them. These men would survive after His departure if they obeyed His command to love one another (**verse 34**). This was not a new command from the biblical standpoint (see Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:34-40), but it was new in the sense of the motive behind it. Their love for each other and others was to be based on His example of selfless and sacrificial love. Demonstrating His kind of love would also identify them as belonging to Him (**verse 35**). Jesus' command to these frightened disciples is also directed to His followers in this present age. Impressive ministries, multiple and varied resources, and doctrinal soundness are not adequate substitutes for a congregation of believers that demonstrates unconditional love for each other and those outside their local fellowship. Jesus' command that we love one another challenges the community of faith to prioritize intentionally teaching believers the necessity of growing spiritually.

Q What Do You Think? Do those in your community who may not know Christ as Savior recognize that unconditionally loving others is a priority in your local congregation?

A Closing Thought


Following Jesus is a challenge to be radically different from the world in our relationships with others inside and outside the church. His expectation for His followers is to model His love through humble, sacrificial service to others. Our obedience to this command is a sign to the world that we belong to Him.

Your Life

Christians are called to love one another by serving, even in undesirable and menial roles. Commit to identify a specific need you can meet this week, alone or with others in your congregation, that may require the personal sacrifice of time and/or economic resources.

Your World!

A hostile world critically observes the community of faith as she relates to those within and without her local setting. Jesus told His disciples that their love for one another was the acid test of the genuineness of their faith and witness. Believers are expected to express love for each other in order to strengthen their witness and prove their spiritual identity.

 **Closing Prayer** Dear God, it is our desire to faithfully answer the call to love each other through selfless service. Thank You for Jesus, who modeled this kind of love by giving His life so that we can enjoy the blessing of eternal salvation. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Conclusion

(Preparing for Next Week's Lesson)

Godly love among believers is only possible when they remain spiritually connected to Christ. Next week's lesson provides the blueprint for how this is accomplished. Read John 15:4-17 as you prepare for this lesson.

Home Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY , November 2	"God Is Disappointed with Israel"	(Isaiah 5:1-7)
TUESDAY , November 3	"God Will Redeem Israel"	(Isaiah 27:2-6)
WEDNESDAY , November 4	"Believers Continue God's Work"	(John 14:8-14)
THURSDAY , November 5	"Jesus Freely Lays Down His Life"	(John 10:11-18)
FRIDAY , November 6	"Facing the World as Jesus Did"	(John 15:18-25)
SATURDAY , November 7	"Jesus Tends to His Vineyard"	(John 15:1-3)
SUNDAY , November 8	"Always Love One Another"	(John 15:4-17)