

The Exalted Order of the Towel

John 13:1-17

On the final night before his death, Jesus exemplified love, explained the meaning of his act, and then exhorted his disciples to follow his example. He stooped to serve.

The act of footwashing (1-11)

Jesus' realization that "his hour had come" (1) led him to prepare his disciples for that hour, and what it would mean for them.

The double emphasis on "love" sets the tone for the whole Upper Room Discourse. Love is not an emotion as much as it is an attitude that results in action. "Love" appears 31 times in chapters 13-17, as opposed to six times in 1-12.

The "supper" was the evening meal, the Passover meal (2).

The fact that Jesus washed Judas' feet, after Judas had determined to betray him shows the greatness of his love. Jesus gave Judas every opportunity to turn from his wicked ways, repent, and follow the Lord. John's reference to Satan's role in Judas' decision heightens the point even further.

Jesus washed the disciples' feet while fully aware of his authority from the Father, his divine origin, and his divine destiny (3),

Foot-washing was needed in Palestine (4-5). The streets were dusty and people wore sandals without socks or stockings. It was mark of honor for a host to provide a servant to wash a guest's feet. It was a breach of hospitality not to provide for it.

Washing feet in such a situation was the role of the most menial of servants. Here, Jesus reversed the normal roles, and assumed the place of a servant rather than that of a rabbi. His act demonstrated love, provided a model of Christian conduct, and symbolized cleansing.

Footwashing was also significant because it prepared the recipient for a task or a relationship. Only those cleansed by Jesus have a relationship with Jesus.

Most of the disciples remained silent as Jesus washed their feet. However, Peter could not refrain from objecting (6). Jesus encouraged Peter to submit to having his feet washed, with the promise that he would understand later why Jesus was doing this (7).

Peter continued to object in the strongest terms (8). Peter was too humble to have his feet washed but not too humble to tell Jesus what to do.

Jesus was speaking of spiritual cleansing, whereas Peter was thinking on a physical level (8).

Rather than terminate the relationship, Peter wanted a more thorough cleansing (9).

A person is bathed all over when they put their faith in Christ and receive forgiveness (10-11). After a person believes in Jesus as Savior and commits sin, they need to be washed by confessing their sin, just as feet get dirty walking through life.

The “unclean disciple” was Judas, who had not believed that Jesus was God’s son (11).

The explanation of the foot washing (13-17)

By changing his clothing and physical position, Jesus now returned to his role as the disciples’ teacher (12). He began to explain the significance of what he had done.

“Teacher” is the Hebrew word, “rabbi.” The title, “Lord,” took on deeper meaning after the resurrection (13).

Jesus had given the Twelve a lesson in humble service of one another (14-15).

The common principle is that the servant has a lower position than their master. Jesus’ point is that no disciples should think it beneath him or her to serve others—since Jesus, the master and sender, had humbled himself to serve (16).

Knowing what to do and actually doing it are often two different things. Jesus promised God’s favor on those who practice humble service (17).

Characteristics of Humility

Humility doesn’t announce itself.

Humility is willing to receive service without embarrassment.

Humility is a sign of strength, not of weakness.

Humility does not discriminate. It serves all without reservation.

Humility includes serving one another, not just the Lord.

The act of humility results in joy and blessing.

Humility turns the structure of authority upside down.

Humility stoops to serve.