

John 13:1-18

Christ's love, humility and cleansing

Introduction

Chapter 13 marks the start of the second half of John's Gospel. Some have described John 13 as the Holy of Holies of the New Testament. Nowhere else do we see the heart of God so unveiled to us. Nowhere else is Christ's speech so simple and so deep. On no other page have so many tear-filled eyes been dried when looking here. The immortal words spoken by our Lord in the Upper Room contain His highest self-revelation. These remaining chapters are the strength and comfort of all truehearted believers. The place wherein we stand is holy ground. Going to find in these verses three important aspects of Christ's work and character.

Christ's love

Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of His love (John 13:1). Some translations – “loved them unto the end”, “loved them to the uttermost” – suggesting the depth of His love.

“His own” – those given to Him by the Father, His redeemed people, God's family. He knew perfectly well all that awaited Him in the next few hours, and also that they were about to forsake Him in His hour of great need. Yet He never ceased having loving thoughts about them. How much He had already loved them in His ministry – He taught them, shared life and companionship with them, bore with patience their dullness and obstinacy. Now even in the face of shameful desertion, Peter's denial etc, He still loves them to the uttermost.

Think on Christ's love for people! More often we stress Christ's love for sinners, for that is the essence and marrow of the Gospel, seen uniquely in the Cross. But Christ's love for His people is no less wonderful, but far less often considered. He bears with our countless infirmities from conversion to death, our endless inconsistencies and petty provocations. He still goes on forgiving and forgetting. He is never provoked to give us up. No mother, watching over her wayward child, has had her patience so completely tried. Yet His longsuffering is infinite. His compassion is a well which is never exhausted. There is no bankruptcy in His expenditure, no diminution in His stores.

No man need be afraid of beginning with Christ. He delights to receive sinners. No man need be afraid of going on with Christ after he has once come to Him and believed. No one needs to fear that the Lord will cast him off because of failures, or dismiss him because of infirmities. He will never reject us because of feeble service and weak performance. Those whom He receives, He keeps. Those He loves at first, He loves at the last. For saints as well as sinners, His promise remains – **Whoever comes to me I will never drive away** (John 6:37). We may know failures, be treated as lepers, despise ourselves, plumb the depths of despair – but however deep we fall, His love and forgiveness is deeper still.

Christ's humility

Jesus and His disciples had come from Bethany. Their feet, protected only by sandals, had become partly exposed to dust and sand. The washing of feet on arrival was customary. This menial task was done by servants. There was nothing more servile and humiliating. A host would not stoop to such an act. The disciples of Jewish Rabbis rendered personal service to their masters, but a service like this was undreamt of.

In the absence of any servants, one of the disciples ought to have done this task. But they all sat tight, none moved. Why should they? Why not someone else? They were too proud. A few moments ago they had been arguing among themselves about who was the greatest (Luke 22:24). There was the pitcher, with water in it, the long linen cloth, and the washbasin. No one stirred. Each was waiting for someone else. Jesus gets up, lays aside His garments, takes the long linen cloth, pours water into the washbasin, and washes the feet of His disciples. He dries them with the towel.

Jesus submits Himself to the most menial task a slave was ever required to do, and did it even to the man who, in a few minutes time, would betray Him to His enemies. He did this in full consciousness of who He was. **Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under His power, and that He had come from God and was returning to God** (John 13:3). He was aware He was the only Son of God and the rightful heir of all things. There is much theological implication here – pre-existence, voluntary incarnation, eternal, divine nature, unbroken communion with the Father.

Who, being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.... Humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:6-8). He could not have come from greater heights, and He could not have stooped to greater depths – washing foul feet of His disciples, as lowly slaves did. It is impossible to illustrate this – the Queen doing a menial task for a beggar in the street, a general becoming a slave to the youngest recruit – but even these pictures do not begin to illustrate. No one can compare with the Lord of glory doing a slave's work. This was an act of condescension for which we can provide no parallel or adequate illustration.

Jesus teaches them a lesson from His act. **Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet** (John 13:14). If Christ in such an exalted position can humble Himself and do the work of a slave, so ought we. Who are we to stand on our dignity and turn up our nose at certain jobs, when our Lord and Master washed the feet of His disciples?

Are we to take this literally? The Pope does. Also Scottish Baptists and Moravians in the past. It was done by English sovereigns till the reign of James II. As so often we have to get behind the act to the basic principle. The injunction is to lowly, humbling service to one another. Our position, wealth, talents are all given to us to use them for our fellows. Any deed of kindness and love we can do for the meanest and most obscure of God's people – we ought to be willing to do it. "Be servants of God's servants" (Pope Gregory the Great).

The person in the highest and most exalted position ought to be willing to do the meanest work. **Whoever wants to be first must be your slave** (Matthew 20:27). The way up is down. Christ's way of rising was to go down. "God's best prizes are found on the lowest shelves" (F.B.Meyer). He descended that He might ascend. And so must we. "There is no sight so displeasing in God's sight as the self-conceited, self-satisfied, self-centred professor of religion. Alas it is a sight only too common" (J.C.Ryle).

Jesus tells His disciples there is nothing they should think themselves too great or too good to do. **You have only one master, and you are all brothers... The greatest among you will be your servant** (Matthew 23:8,11). "There are too many of us who profess to be quite willing to trust to Jesus Christ as Cleanser of our souls who are not nearly so willing to accept His example as the pattern for our lives" (Alexander Maclaren). The true use of superiority is service. The Cross was not just the instrument of salvation, but the pattern and law of life and character.

J.C.Ryle wrote, "Pride because we possess wealth, rank, position, place, education or high breeding is condemned heavily in this passage. He who would shrink from doing the least kindness to the poorest Christian, has read these verses to little purpose and does not copy His master's example. Doctrinal orthodoxy without practical love and humility is utterly worthless before God."

Christ's cleansing

In the course of washing the disciples' feet, Peter refused to allow Jesus to deal with His feet. **Unless I wash you, you have no part with me** (John 13:8), was Jesus' response to Peter. Peter therefore asked the Lord to wash not only his feet, but his head and hands also. He sees Jesus' meaning in a crude literal way, and fails to see the spiritual significance.

It is a common feature in John's Gospel to present two meanings – the surface meaning, which is physical, and the beneath the surface meaning, which is spiritual. Jesus fed 5000 – He was also the Bread of Life. Water was ordinary water to the Samaritan woman, but to Jesus it meant eternal life. Jesus spoke of being lifted up – again there was the literal sense as the wooden cross was elevated, but His real exaltation was spiritual.

So with the theme of cleansing – the cleansing of the feet, and the cleansing of the soul. **A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet** (John 13:10). Jesus Christ came, laying aside His glory, as He laid aside His garments, and He came to cleanse men from sin by His atoning death. Perfect cleansing and adequate cleansing is available. We all need this washing. Unless we have this washing, we will have no fellowship with Christ. Then after salvation and membership of the family of God, we need daily application and daily pardon. We cannot pass through this evil world without defilement. Not a day passes in our lives where we do not fail and therefore need fresh supplies of mercy. Even our service is tainted with mixed motives. Even our prayers need to be made acceptable because of mistaken petitions and wrong motives.

Here is great practical truth – once we are cleansed and joined to Christ, we are absolved and counted without blame before God. Yet we have to confess our daily failures. We still sin, but as a son, not as a rebel. Sin disturbs our communion, but cannot break our union. We do not need to be reborn and justified all over again. Daily cleansing requires keeping in touch with God, and keeping our conscience clear and sensitive.

By way of post-script, Jesus comments, **You are clean, though not every one of you** (John 13:10). This is His final appeal to Judas. The tragedy of Judas was that He was chosen by Christ, lived three years in His society, witnessed miracles, heard the teaching and received much loving kindness, he was sent out two by two with the others to perform miracles. Yet in the end he was possessed by the Devil and went headlong to destruction. What lengths we may go in religious profession and still end up a rotten hypocrite.

Hence the uselessness of privileges and head knowledge and outward service, without the grace of God in our lives. Therefore pray that we may be genuine, sincere and real. Our faith may be feeble, we may have many failures, and small knowledge. But if we are real and true, we can say with Peter **Lord you know all things, you know that I love you** (John 21:17).