

Session 4

March 22, 2020

Unit 1: Jesus Is . . .

The Humble Servant

Jesus is our model of humble service to others.

The Word

John 13:1-17

Engage the Word

The Context of the Foot Washing

John 13:1-5

As is usual, John's gospel has packed a surplus of meaning into a few words. By telling us the event took place "just before the Passover festival," John connects the foot washing and the approaching death of Jesus with the Old Testament account of the Exodus from Egypt and the pivotal, tenth plague that convinced the Pharaoh to let Israel go free. Deliverance—whether from sin or from an evil empire—does not depend on power and military might when God is involved. Rather, humble obedience in service to God opens the way to freedom.

Washing the feet of guests was common courtesy in the ancient Near East (and most cultures today where sandals are the typical footwear and walking is the typical mode of transportation). Dusty roads littered with garbage, refuse, and manure inevitably caused feet clad in sandals to become dirty, uncomfortable, unhealthy, and stinky. Every household had a person assigned to wash the feet of guests and there was nothing pleasant about that task. By virtue of that assignment, the foot washer had the lowest status of anyone in the household.

The key to the foot washing done by Jesus comes in the words of verse 1, "Having loved his own . . . he loved them to the end." Washing the disciples' feet would have been regarded as humiliating. The removal of one's outer clothing was considered

shameful in the culture of Jesus' time. Some scholars suggest that stripping himself to wash the disciples' feet symbolized the shame Jesus would bear on the cross just days later. How was He able to humble himself in this way? Love. Love led Him to wash the disciples' feet. Love led Him to the cross to die for us.

The Conflict in Having One's Feet Washed

John 13:6-11

The conversation between Jesus and Peter recorded in John 13:6-10 is puzzling at several levels, but two things are very clear. First, Peter does not understand what Jesus is doing. He seemed to think that the primary point was the power of water to clean his feet and all the rest of his body. Clean feet for the disciples was one of Jesus' goals, but it was not primary. Peter's failure to understand was ultimately a failure to understand love and being loved.

Second, Jesus clearly connected washing Peter's feet with a "part with" Him. Peter understood that Jesus was the last person in the room who "should have" been washing the group's feet. That Jesus had undertaken this task shamed Peter. He was not ashamed enough to offer to take over the foot washing task, but culturally he knew that Jesus was humiliating himself by washing the disciples' feet. Naturally he resisted that humiliation of Jesus because he did not understand the fellowship of suffering that comes to those who humbly serve. Many today fail to have a "part with" Jesus because they will not submit to humble service.

The state of Peter's heart is not clear to us. It seems likely that it was pride that caused him to push aside Jesus' act of service. However, other explanations are possible. Shame and cultural blindness may have also figured in Peter's conflicted response to Jesus.

Jesus' Conclusion to the Foot Washing

John 13:12-17

There are times when actions need no explanation to make their point. But usually actions need explanations if we are to understand the teaching purpose of those actions. Jesus knew that the disciples could have drawn several differing conclusions from His action of washing their feet. He specifically wanted them to understand that His washing of their feet was an example for them to follow. He also wanted them to know that earthly status must never impede His followers from humble service.

Christlikeness is not simply a matter of an attitude. Followers of Jesus must do as He has done. Unfortunately, it is possible to participate in a service of foot washing and

never love as Jesus loved when He washed the disciples' feet. It is possible never to translate the humble service of foot washing in ancient culture into acts of humble service in our culture. But doing acts of humble service are necessary if we are to be blessed.

The titles Jesus used of himself in John 13:13, "teacher" and "Lord," were strategically selected. They represent the most honored titles attributed to Jesus in Jewish culture. His point is that there is no position of leadership, no honored status in the community of Jesus, that exempts His followers from acts of humble service. Acts of humble service reveal the DNA of Christlikeness in a person.

The expectation of humble service is one of the most difficult expectations of Jesus that we encounter. Like Peter, we are conflicted by our desire to control the Lord and bend His will to benefit us, but if we want to participate in His community and in His life we must learn this lesson.

Did You Know?

The Greek word translated "end" in verse 1 can mean the end of a time period. It can mean "completely," or it can mean the accomplishment of a goal.

Think About It

Foot washing is not an act of humble service in cultures where shoes and stockings are the normal footwear and people seldom walk in dirt. What are actions in our culture that are acts of humble service?

Reflect

In what ways can you wash the feet of others this week?

Roger Hahn