

JOHN — WEEK 18

HUMILITY



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is *Ecce Homo (Behold the Man)* by Caravaggio

Jesus uses washing His disciples' feet as an object lesson about humility and rejection of society's hierarchical system of viewing some people as better than others. That humility undergirds our love.

That love is Christianity's signature behavior.

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1 John 13:2–5

And supper being ended, the devil having 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 to God, rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.

This is the strangest segue ever. Supper has ended. The devil has prepped Judas to betray Jesus. Jesus knows *that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God.*

So, what does He do? He gets up and starts washing everyone's feet.

That's weird in so many ways. You normally wash people's feet when they arrive dirty, not after dinner. Plus, only servants normally wash other people's feet.

But the weirdest thing is that this is Jesus's response to what just happened—what God did and what the devil did. Somehow, that makes this the right moment to wash everyone's feet. Why now? What's so perfect about this moment?

Well, notice that this lesson is different. It's not a parable. He's not saying anything confusing. (He's not saying anything period.) It's just a simple lesson in humbling ourselves in the service of others.

Jesus has saved this lesson for last because it's so important. His disciples are going to become some of the most famous people in history. Fame can destroy people through the sin of pride. They need to be vaccinated against that.

Thus, it makes sense that this is Jesus's response to the preceding events. All the pieces are coming together. His time is at hand.

The Last Supper is His last chance to wash their feet. He'll be too busy tomorrow.

Part of the genius of this lesson is its shock value. Everything about it, even the timing, is surprising. That sears it into the minds of the disciples.

While Jesus will go on to explain what He's doing, at this point He's staying quiet. Everyone is a bit puzzled and Peter, as we'll soon see, is even offended it.

Good. They can't sleep though this one.

This lesson is as difficult as it is important. Humility is an advanced skill.

It'll take a while for this to sink in.

2 John 13:6–11

Then He came to Simon Peter. And Peter said to Him, “Lord, are You washing my feet?”

Jesus answered and said to him, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this.”

Peter said to Him, “You shall never wash my feet!”

Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.”

Simon Peter said to Him, “Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!”

Jesus said to him, “He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.” For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said, “You are not all clean.”

Peter doesn't understand. He thinks Jesus needs their feet to be clean. But if that was the issue, Jesus would have done this earlier. Jesus's purpose is teaching, not cleaning.

Peter also objects to their leader doing such a menial task. To Peter, Jesus washing their feet isn't just surprising; it's wrong. It violates society's rules of hierarchy.

That makes Jesus's point. That hierarchy mentality has no place in the kingdom of heaven.

A hierarchy mentality can be the Achilles' heel of a church.

“The church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum of saints.” — Abigail Van Buren

For example, church leaders should not be selected based on their station in society. There are only a few qualifications related to secular life at all.

A bishop then must be blameless, ... Moreover, he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. — 1 Timothy 3:2a, 7

Paul goes on to list similar qualifications for deacons, but they aren't about money, education, or status. Actually, one is about money, but not in a positive way.

Likewise deacons must be reverent, ... not greedy for money. — 1 Timothy 3:8

While it's okay for a deacon or elder to be wealthy, highly educated, or successful, it's not okay for the leadership of a church to be chosen exclusively from people of high station.

The apostles certainly weren't.

3 John 13:12–17

So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. 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 should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.”

Jesus now takes the time to hammer home the takeaway from the example He just set. He has taught repeatedly about loving your neighbor. Now He teaches the foundation of how to do it without pretending—R-E-S-P-E-C-T.

Theoretically, this should be simple, but it’s not. Man’s sinful nature gives everyone the mind of a bully—even if they don’t act it out.

The disciples need to break out of the mindset that their culture—and their sinful nature—has instilled in them. Christianity is different because it’s a different kind of kingdom. Our king isn’t a bit greater than everyone else; He’s infinitely greater.

His subjects shouldn’t get too excited about their own greatness.

When I was young, put-down jokes were all the rage. The targets were mostly ethnicities, religions, and blondes—especially blondes. We loved to joke about how stupid everyone else was.

Nowadays we’ve dialed back the digs a bit, but our attitude hasn’t really changed. We can memorize how God created everyone in His image ‘til we’re blue in the face and still not take it to heart. Same for the Declaration of Independence’s line, “All men are created equal.”

The secret is understanding what Jesus taught here. We all know we’re better at some things and worse at others, but our abilities aren’t all that impressive in the grand scheme of things. The One who is impressive gave a demonstration of how we should act.

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 should do as I have done to you.

Our abilities are not where dignity and respect come from anyway. They come from Genesis 1:27.

So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Let’s be honest; we’re not wired for humility. You don’t learn this lesson overnight; you learn it over a lifetime.

And the more you learn it, the more you realize you don’t know the half of it.

4 John 13:18–30

“I do not speak concerning all of you. I know whom I have chosen; but that the Scripture may be fulfilled, ‘He who eats bread with Me has lifted up his heel against Me.’ Now I tell you before it comes, that when it does come to pass, you may believe that I am He. Most assuredly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.”

When Jesus had said these things, He was troubled in spirit, and testified and said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me.” Then the disciples looked at one another, perplexed about whom He spoke.

Now there was leaning on Jesus’ bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved. Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask who it was of whom He spoke.

Then, leaning back on Jesus’ breast, he said to Him, “Lord, who is it?”

Jesus answered, “It is he to whom I shall give a piece of bread when I have dipped it.” And having dipped the bread, He gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon. Now after the piece of bread, Satan entered him. Then Jesus said to him, “What you do, do quickly.” But no one at the table knew for what reason He said this to him. For some thought, because Judas had the money box, that Jesus had said to him, “Buy those things we need for the feast,” or that he should give something to the poor.

Having received the piece of bread, he then went out immediately. And it was night.

This all seems clear enough, and familiar enough to most Christians, except for one sentence. *Now after the piece of bread, Satan entered him.* The timing is troubling. Why then?

It helps to get one thing straight. While most of the conversations in this passage are public, one is not. When the disciple whom Jesus loved (John) leaned back and asked Jesus, *“Lord, who is it?”*, that’s private. That’s why the text includes the note that John leaned back to ask the question. Jesus’s answer is private too.

But someone else can hear it—Satan. That may explain everything, since that could mean that he just learned that Jesus knows all about Judas. Satan doesn’t understand the higher purposes of what’s going on, but he now knows that Jesus knows about his “inside man.” His secret plot isn’t so secret.

That would explain his sudden actions. It sure looks like he was hit with a sense of urgency.

This isn’t the only possible explanation. I wouldn’t want to underestimate Satan; he’s more dangerous than we know. It’s possible that he understood some of these things before—though he obviously never understood the purpose of Jesus going to the cross. If he had, he would have aborted his plan.

Instead, he kicked it into high gear immediately after Jesus showed John who His betrayer would be.

That doesn’t feel like a coincidence.

5 John 13:31–35 (ESV)

When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come.’ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

There’s a twist in verse 34 that’s obvious in the Greek, but doesn’t come through clearly in English translations. The words, “*that you love one another,*” are not part of the new commandment.

The new commandment is, “*Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.*” The earlier clause, “*that you love one another,*” is a purpose clause; it’s the purpose of that commandment.

There’s no way to say this accurately in English without it sounding clumsy and repetitive, though the meaning is clear and important.

Remember, Jesus just washed the disciples’ feet. That was yet another demonstration of His love for them. Now He’s connecting that to what their discipleship should look like. His point is a three-step sequence.

- 1) “*Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.*” He’s challenging them to *love one another* as much as He has loved them. That’s quite a throw-down.
- 2) *So that you love one another.* If they can mimic His love, their love will be real and obvious.
- 3) *By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.* People will notice.

To drive the point home, He says *love one another* three times.

That will become Christianity’s signature behavior.

This completes Jesus’s final lesson to His disciples. From here on, events will be unfolding too quickly for a lecture. Jesus will make points—there’s still more to be learned—but this is His last “classroom” lesson.

Consider how this whole sequence fits together. First Jesus demonstrates humility and love by washing His disciples’ feet. Next, He explains why He did it and generalizes the concept to teach them humility. Then, after dispatching Judas, He wraps it up with a thrice-repeated command to love one another and points out that this will be how everyone will recognize them as His disciples.

That’s Christian leadership in a can—humility and love.

They go hand-in-hand.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What's the mark of a humble person?
2. Do you know any church leaders of little secular status?
3. How can we "practice" humility?
4. Have you ever seen something you thought was supernatural just because of the timing?
5. Humility & love. What does one without the other look like?

Items for prayer: