Chapter 34

The Master Serving; Or, Another Lesson In Humility

Section 1 - The Washing

John 13:1-11

Up to this point, John has not said very much about the special relationship between Jesus and the Twelve. Now, however, he more than makes up for this deficiency. Except for two chapters telling of Jesus' passion, the third part of his Gospel, which begins in chapter 13, is completely dedicated to the tender, intimate relationship between the Lord Jesus and “His own.” This part of his Gospel begins with the evening before His death and continues until the time when He left this world, leaving them behind. Chapters 13-17 tell about situations and conversations that took place in the last hours that the Savior spent with His disciples. This all happened prior to His betrayal into the hands of His enemies. He has spoken His final words to the outside world. Now He has withdrawn Himself to the fellowship of His own family, and we have the privilege of seeing Him among His spiritual children and hearing His farewell words to them in the light of His impending death. It is important that we enter the supper chamber with deep reverence. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground” (Ex. 3:5).

As we enter the room, the first thing we see is Jesus washing His disciples' feet. Amazing sight! As John narrates the incident, he has been careful to enhance its impressiveness by the way in which he introduces it. He has put this beautiful picture in the best light so it would stand out. The preface to the story is a little puzzling to expositors. That is because of the way the sentences are presented, and because the sense of the passage is somewhat obscure. Many thoughts and feelings crowd into the Apostle's mind as he proceeds to tell about the memorabilia (things worth remembering) of that eventful night. They seem to compete with one another as they all try to be spoken. However, it is not very difficult to unravel the meaning of these opening sentences. First, John refers to the unique compassion that Jesus felt toward His disciples on the eve of His crucifixion as He contemplated His departure from the earth to heaven: “Now before the feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He should depart out of this world” (Jn. 13:1). At such a time as this, how did He feel toward the men who had been His companions throughout the years of His public ministry, and whom He was soon to leave behind? “He loved them to the end” (vs. 1). Jesus was not selfishly consumed with His own sorrows or with the joys that would come to Him later. Instead, He found room in His heart for His followers. His love was a flame that burned toward them with unusual passion. His whole
concern was that He prepare them for future responsibilities and trials through His teaching and example and by using words of comfort, warning, and instruction. The narrative John has written abundantly demonstrates this.

The second verse of the preface alludes (parenthetically) to a fact which highlighted the faithfulness of Jesus: “the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him.” John was saying: “Jesus loved His disciples to the end, even though they did not all love Him. At this very moment, one of them entertained the diabolic thought of betraying his Lord. Even so, that same Lord loved him. He humbled Himself to wash Judas’ feet. By doing this, He was endeavoring, if possible, to overcome his evil with good.”

In the last sentence of his preface, John’s goal is to show what wonderful humility the Savior had to wash the feet of any of the disciples. Jesus knew these things that were true about Him: (1) “that the Father had given all things into His hands” (sovereign power over all creation); (2) “that He had come forth from God” (a divine being by nature and entitled to divine honors); and (3) that He “was going back to God” (to enter into the enjoyment of these honors). So, He did just as John records in this text. The Majestic Being who had such intrinsic dignity, such a consciousness, such a future, “rose from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, girded Himself about” (vs. 4). After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet. Then He wiped them with the towel with which He was girded (vs. 5).

It seems that all of this took place just before they were about to eat the evening meal. John’s words may be translated “supper having begun,” or better still, “supper-time having arrived.” From the sequel of the narrative, it is evident that his words must be understood in this way. The supper was still going on when Jesus introduced the subject of the traitor. He did not introduce it until after He had washed the feet of His disciples. Then He resumed His seat at the table and gave an explanation about what He had just done (Jn. 13:12ff.).

We will consider that explanation later. For now, it seems that the reason Jesus washed their feet was because the disciples had done something wrong. We believe Jesus had to humble Himself because His disciples would not humble themselves. This impression is confirmed by a statement in Luke’s Gospel. He tells us that on the same evening, the Twelve got into an argument about which of them was the greatest. We do not know why this new strife arose among them. It is possible that the old argument about their positions was revived by the words Jesus spoke as they were about to sit down to supper: “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God” (Lk. 22:15-16). His allusion to the kingdom was certainly adequate to set their imaginations on fire and re-awaken old dreams about thrones. Old fights and jealousies would come from old dreams. These would come naturally and easily. And so, even before the supper began, we can
understand how the conversation between them became loud and heated. On the other hand, the point they might have fought over could have been about where they should sit at the table, or who should serve for this occasion and wash the feet of the company. Any one of these theories might account for the situation recorded by Luke. It does not require much to make children fight.

The method Jesus used to divert the minds of His disciples from unedifying topics and to remove ambitious passions from their hearts was a very effective one. Even His preliminary actions at the beginning of the feet-washing must have gone a long way to change their ruffled emotions. How the spectators must have stared and wondered as the Master of the feast rose from His seat, laid aside His outer garment, girded Himself with a towel, and poured water into a basin. He did all of this with self-control, composure, and deliberation.

We are not told which disciple Jesus approached first. But we do know (we might have guessed without being told) who was the first to speak his mind about what was going on. When Peter’s turn came, he had recovered enough from the shock of what he was witnessing to be able to think about how wrong all of it was. He considered it to be a role-reversal between the Master and His servants. The first disciple whose feet Jesus washed may have yielded passively to His Lord’s will. But when Jesus came to Peter, the outspoken disciple asked in amazement, “Lord, do You wash my feet?” (Jn. 13:6). His spirit rebelled at the offer. He felt it would do damage to the dignity of his beloved Lord. It outraged his own sense of reverence. Peter is not to be discredited because he was repulsed by the thought of the suggestion, and his Master did not disapprove of the statement either. Jesus’ reply to his objection is very respectful: “What I do you do not realize now; but you shall understand hereafter” (vs. 7). He virtually admits that what He is doing needs explanation, and that Peter’s opposition is perfectly natural. “I acknowledge,” He essentially said to Peter, “that my present action is an offence to the feelings of reverence which you rightly have toward Me. Nevertheless, allow it. I am doing this for reasons which you do not comprehend now, but which you will understand before long.”

If Peter had been satisfied with this reply, no one could have blamed him for his conduct. But he was not content. He continued to oppose Jesus after He had distinctly made His will known. So Peter vehemently and stubbornly exclaimed: “Never shall You wash my feet!” The tone totally changes here. Peter’s first comment was the expression of sincere reverence. His second is simply the language of unmitigated irreverence and downright disobedience. He rudely contradicts His Master. At the same time, we might add that he flatly contradicts himself. His behavior on this occasion presents an odd mixture of moral opposites: self-humiliation and self-will, humility and pride, respect and disrespect for Jesus. One moment he speaks to Jesus as one whose shoe he is not worthy to untie. Before you know it, he speaks to Him like he could order Him around. What a strange man! But, indeed, how strange we all are!
When Peter changed his tone, Jesus found it necessary to alter His as well. He changed from being mild in His first reply to being stern like a judge. “If I do not wash you,” He said with all seriousness, “you have no part with Me” (vs. 8). What He means is this: “You have taken a very serious position, Simon Peter. The question at hand is simply this: ‘Are you, or are you not, to be admitted into My kingdom - to be a true disciple, and to have a true disciple’s reward?’”

On the surface, it is difficult to see how this could be the thrust of the question. One is tempted to think that Jesus was using exaggeration for the purpose of intimidating a stubborn disciple into compliance with His will. If we reject this method of interpretation as incompatible with the character of the Speaker and the seriousness of the occasion, we must look at the question again: What does “washing” mean in this statement? Evidently it signifies more than meets the ear. It is more than a literal washing of the feet. It is to be regarded as a symbol of the washing of the soul from sin. To state it more comprehensively and, in our opinion, more correctly, it represents all of Christ’s teaching and work which would be compromised if Peter’s opposition to Jesus washing his feet were carried out by others. In either case, the statement made by Jesus was true. In the first case, it is obvious. In the last, it is not as obvious but no less a fact, as we will proceed to demonstrate.

Look at what was involved in Peter’s attitude. He virtually took his stand on these two positions: (1) He would not allow any behavior that seemed inconsistent with the personal dignity of his Lord; and (2) He would adopt as his rule of conduct his own judgment and would prefer that over Christ’s will. One position is seen in the question, “Do You wash my feet?” The other can be found in the resolution, “Never shall You wash my feet!” In other words, the convictions held by Peter compromised the whole sum and substance of Christianity. The first principle sweeps away Christ’s whole condition and experience of humiliation. The last one erodes the foundation of Christ’s lordship.

This is no exaggeration on our part. A moment’s reflection will demonstrate that. First, look at Peter’s objection to the feet-washing with respect to the issue of reverence. If Jesus would not wash the feet of His disciples because it was beneath His dignity, then it might be argued that any act involving self-humiliation would be objectionable. Anyone who says, “You will not wash my feet, because doing that is not worthy of You,” might also say, “You will not wash my soul or do anything toward fulfilling that purpose, because it involves humiliating experiences.” Why be concerned over such a small matter of detail? Go to the heart of the matter at once and ask, “Will the Eternal Son of God become flesh and live among us? Will He who was in the form of God lay aside His royal robes and gird Himself with the towel of humanity in order to perform menial tasks for His own creatures? Will the ever-blessed One become a curse by enduring crucifixion? Will the Holy One degrade Himself by coming into close companionship with the
depraved sons of Adam? Will the Righteous One pour His life-blood into a basin, that there may be a fountain wherein the unrighteous may be cleansed from their guilt and iniquity?” In short, the incarnation, atonement, and Christ’s whole earthly experience of temptation, hardship, indignity, and sorrow must go if Jesus is not allowed to wash a disciple’s feet.

It is also clear that Christ’s lordship comes to a complete stop if a disciple can give Him orders and say, “You will never wash my feet.” If Peter meant anything more by his words than their just being a display of his frame of mind and his impulsiveness, he meant this: He would not submit to the proposed act because his moral feelings and his judgment told him it was wrong. He made his own reason and conscience the supreme rule of conduct. It was wrong, in the first place, because Peter’s position compromised the principle of obedience. This principle requires that the Lord’s will, once it is known, will rule, whether we understand its reason or perceive its goodness or not. There are other things much more important than the washing of the feet to which one might object on the basis of reason or conscience. For example, Christ tells us that those who want to be His disciples and gain entrance into His kingdom must be willing to give up their earthly possessions, even their closest and dearest friends. To many people, this seems unreasonable. Using Peter’s principle, they would say in a straightforward way, “I will never do any such thing.” Or, consider another example. Christ tells us that we must be born again, and that we must eat His flesh and drink His blood. To me, these doctrines may seem incomprehensible, or even absurd. And, therefore, using Peter’s principle, I may turn my back on the great Teacher and say, “I will not have for a Master this Person who speaks dark, mysterious sayings.” One final example: Christ tells us that we must give the kingdom of God first place in our thoughts and dismiss troublesome concerns about tomorrow from our hearts. In my current frame of mind, this seems to be simply impossible. Therefore, using Peter’s principle, I may set aside this moral requirement as utopian, no matter how beautiful, without even seriously attempting to comply with it.

Now that we know where Peter’s refusal leads, we can see that Jesus spoke the simple truth when He said, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me” (Jn. 13:8). Look at that refusal as an objection to Christ’s humbling Himself. If Christ is not able to humble Himself, then, first of all, He can have no part with us. The Holy Son of God is prohibited from becoming anything like His brothers because of His dignity. He cannot even acknowledge them as His brothers. The great paternal law, by which the Sanctifier is identified with those who are to be sanctified, is revoked, and all of its consequences are made void. A great impassable gulf separates the Divine Being from His creatures. He may stand on the distant shore and eagerly contemplate their miserable condition. But He cannot, He dares not - His majesty forbids it - come near them and reach out with a helping hand.
Secondly, if the Son of God has no part with us, then we can have no part with Him. We cannot share His fellowship with the Father, if He does not come forth to declare Him. We cannot receive any acts of brotherly kindness from Him. He cannot deliver us from the curse of the law or from the fear of death. He cannot help us when we are tempted. He cannot wash our feet. And what is an even more serious matter, He cannot wash our souls. If there is not going to be a fountain that is opened for sin in the human nature of Immanuel, sinners must remain impure. A God who is far away is not able, even if He were willing, to purify the human soul. A God whose majesty kept Him aloof from sinners could not even effectively forgive them. Still less could He sanctify them. Love alone has sanctifying virtue. Is there room for love in a Being who cannot humble Himself to be a servant?

Consider Peter’s refusal as resistance to Christ’s will. With this perspective, Jesus’ saying was justified, “You have no part with Me” (Jn. 13:8). Salvation was not available for Peter on his own terms. For if Jesus is not Lord of a person’s life, He will not be Savior (Peter the Apostle understood this well. Four times in his second epistle he joins the words Lord and Savior when he names Christ - 1:11; 2:20; 3:2,18). Neither would fellowship be available to him. For Jesus will not have communion with self-will. His own attitude toward His Father was, “Not My will, but Thine.” And He demands this attitude toward Himself from all of His disciples. He will be the Author of eternal salvation but only to them that obey Him. Not that He would want us to always be servants, blindly obeying a Lord whose will we do not understand. His goal is to advance us, ultimately, to the status of friends (John 15:15), doing His will intelligently and freely - not complying mechanically because of an outward commandment, but doing His will because we want to. We can reach this high position only by beginning to obey as a servant would. So, we must do what we do not now understand. And we must allow things to be done to us that we do not now understand. The reason? That we may know, from this moment on, what our obligations are to our Lord, and how our Lord deals with us. Mature obedience lies in doing that which unenlightened reverence finds peculiarly hard, namely, in letting the Lord change places with us, and if He thinks it is good, humble Himself to be our servant.

It was a serious thing, therefore, for Peter to say, “Never shall you wash my feet!” (Jn. 13:8). But he was not aware of how serious it was. He did not understand what he said, or what he did. He had quickly held to a position without considering its consequences. His heart was right, but his frame of mind was not. Therefore, the stern declaration from Jesus brought him immediately to his senses, or rather, to a position that was in the opposite direction. The notion that he would be cut off from his dear Master’s sympathy or favor because of his straying drove him, out of sheer fear, to the opposite extreme of compliance (he went overboard). He said, in essence, “If my interest in You depends on my feet being washed, then Lord, wash my whole body - hands, head, feet, and every part.” How characteristic of him! He is so much like a child whose heart contains so much foolishness but also much affection, and who can always be managed by love! At this
point in Peter's life, there is still a sad lack of balance in his character. Swinging like a pendulum, he goes from one extreme to another. It will take some time before he settles down and gets some balance in all aspects of his being - his intellect, will, heart, and conscience. But the root of the matter is in him. He is sound at the core. And after his share of mistakes, he will become a wise man. He is clean and does not need more than to have his feet washed. Jesus Himself conveys this to him and to all of his fellow disciples, except one. And this one is unclean all over.