Section 2 - The Explanation

John 13:12-20

When Peter’s resistance was overcome, the washing proceeded without further interruption. Then, when Jesus finished washing the feet of all His disciples, He put on His outer garment, resumed His seat, and briefly explained the purpose behind His actions. “Do you know what I have done to you?” (Jn. 13:12). Then, answering His own question, He continued by saying, “You call me Teacher, and Lord; and you are right; for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.” (vss. 13-15).

It was another lesson in humility that Jesus was giving His disciples. It was a lesson that was very similar to the earlier ones recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John's Christ, as we see here, teaches the same doctrine as the Christ of the first three evangelists. The Twelve are depicted by John in the same way we have found them in the first three Gospels. They really need to be taught meekness and brotherly kindness. Jesus teaches them these virtues in much the same way here as He does in other places. He uses precept and example (a symbolic action), and adds a word of interpretation. At one time in His life, He had held up a little child to shame them out of their ambitions. Here He rebukes their pride by becoming the servant of the household. At another time, He stopped their arguing by referring to His own self-humiliation in coming from heaven to minister to people's needs in life and death. In this instance, He accomplishes the same purpose by expressing the spirit and goal of His whole earthly ministry. He humbles Himself in an act that was representative and symbolic.

Jesus gave this lesson like all of the others, with the authority of someone who could lay down the law. In the very act of becoming a servant, He asserts His sovereignty. When He finished serving them, He reminds His disciples about the titles they were prone to give Him. In a striking, emphatic way, He accepts them as titles that rightly belong to Him. He tells them distinctly that He is truly their Teacher - it is their business to learn His doctrine. He is their Lord, and it is their duty to obey Him. His humility, therefore, is clearly not a display of ignorance about who and what He is. He knows full well who He is, from where He has come, and where He is going.
His humility is that of a king - yes, a Divine Being. He becomes a model of meekness to His followers and demands that they pay attention to His behavior and try to copy it.

In making this demand, Jesus is obviously not joking. Just as He insisted that He should wash their feet, He is serious about requiring the disciples to wash one another’s feet. He said to Peter in clear terms, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me” (Jn. 13:8).

**The Rarity and Difficulty of Humility**

This is a hard saying. If it is difficult to believe in the humiliation of Christ, how much harder it is to humble ourselves. Frequently and urgently, Christ declares that we must have the same spirit that was manifested in His humiliation for us. Yet even sincere disciples are constantly (though it may be unconsciously) inventing excuses for treating the example of their Lord as if it cannot be imitated. Therefore, in reality, He becomes no example at all. Even when Jesus uses an unanswerable argument to enforce imitation, He does not escape secret criticism. He said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master; neither one who is sent greater than the one who sent him” (Jn. 13:16). We say, “It may be more necessary for the servant to humble himself than for the Master to do so, but, in some respects, it is also more difficult. The Master can afford to humble Himself. His actions will not be misunderstood. They will be accepted for what they are. But the servant cannot afford to be humble. He must assert himself and assume certain attitudes in order to make himself important.”

The great Master knew all too well how slow people would be to learn the lesson He had just been teaching His disciples. Therefore, He added this note to His explanation of the feet-washing: “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them” (vs. 17). He was hinting at how rare and how difficult such a high morality - the kind He had been teaching - is. He was also declaring the blessedness of the few who actually attained it. Surely His thoughts are right! Isn’t the morality that He is espousing here rare? Aren’t the virtues that rise to the surface by doing acts of humility and love very high and difficult? Who would ever dream of calling them easy? How totally contrary they are to the natural tendencies of the human heart! How foreign to the spirit of today’s culture! Are people generally content to be in the humblest place and to seek the happiness of others by serving them? Isn’t the spirit within us envious? Isn’t it ambitious to the point of striving for positions of influence? Doesn’t it think that the greatest happiness is to be served? Doesn’t this spirit seek to be exempt from the drudgery of tasks that belong to servants? The world does not argue about the difficulty of practicing this Christ-like virtue. Instead, it exaggerates its difficulty, and says it is utopian and impracticable - simply a beautiful, unattainable ideal.

No proof is needed to convince the sincere disciple of Jesus that the task given to him by his Lord is difficult. He knows from experience how far his conduct lags behind his knowledge. He knows how hard it is to move from admiring a goodness that is not of this world to imitating
it in practice. With his mind, he is able to talk about the teachings and the life of the Savior. He has read and re-read the gospel story and fondly lingers over its smallest details. His heart has burned as he followed the footsteps of the Blessed One walking about on this earth, always intent on doing good. There are stories that are sweeter to his ears than the finest lyric poems - the woman by the well, the sinner in the house of Simon, and Zaccheus the publican. There are the touching incidents like the one where the little child is used to illustrate the principle of humility, or the one where the Master washed the feet of the arguing disciples. There are the extraordinary parables of the Lost Sheep, the Prodigal Son, and the Good Samaritan. But when he has to close his New Testament and go away into the rude, ungodly, matter-of-fact world, and be a Christ-like person there, and do the things that he knows so well (he even considers himself blessed because he knows them), behold, what a descent! It is like a fall from Eden into a state of sin and misery. And the longer the disciple lives, and the more he gets mixed up with life’s relationships and situations, the further he seems to fall away from the gospel pattern. Then, at some point, he is almost ashamed to think or speak about the beauty of holiness that is taught in the Word. He is tempted to adopt a lower and more worldly attitude because he wants to be sincere. He is afraid of becoming a sentimental hypocrite like Judas, who kissed his Master at the very moment he was betraying Him.

A Three-Fold Blessedness
The happiness of those who are enabled to practice this virtue is in direct proportion to its difficulty and rarity. They have a three-fold blessedness. First, they have the joy that is connected to the achievement of doing a difficult task. Things that are easy to do bring small pains with them, but they also bring small pleasures. Unbelievable delight is reserved for those who attempt and accomplish that which seems impossible. And what joys can be purer, holier, and more intense than those of the person who has finally succeeded in getting to the place where he has the mind of the meek and humble One - Jesus Christ. After a long climb, he reaches the alpine summit of self-emptying, self-humbling love! Secondly, those who practice the things that are taught here also win for themselves the approval of their Lord. A teacher is pleased when a pupil understands his lesson, but a master is pleased only when his servants do what he wants them to do. Christ, being Teacher and Master, demands that we do as well as know. And the Lord of Christians is satisfied - in proportion to the difficulty of the demand - with all sincere efforts to obey His will and to follow His example. To all who make such efforts, there is great joy in knowing that Jesus, the One they serve, gives them His approval. This thought sustains the mind with peace, even when one does not have the joy of winning the approval of his friends: “I am guided in what I am currently doing by the Spirit of Jesus, and He approves of what I am doing.” This is not an unimportant remark. For it is often true that we will please other people the least when we are pleasing the Lord the most. You will please many people by being carefully selfish much more readily than by having an absolute commitment to doing what is right. “People will praise you when you serve yourself.” And it will not bother them at all when a believer deviates from pure
Christian morality and pursues self-interest - as long as he is successful. Even religious people will often trouble and grieve you by giving you advice that has the flavor of worldly wisdom rather than Christian simplicity and godly sincerity. But if Christ approves of us, we may very well have to do without the sympathy and approval of other people. Their approval is, at best, a comfort. His is a matter of life and death.

The third element in the happiness of the person who is not merely a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the perfect law of Christ, is that he escapes the guilt that comes to others because they do not have enough knowledge. It is a very common religious belief that to sin against light is worse than to sin in ignorance. “Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin” (Jas. 4:17). And, of course, the clearer the light, the greater the responsibility. Now, there is no department of Christian truth that is clearer than that of Christian ethics. There are some doctrines which the church as a whole can hardly know. These doctrines are so mysterious, or so disputed. But Jesus' ethical teaching is simple and full in all of its main points. It is universally understood and just as universally admired. Protestants and Roman Catholics, Trinitarians, Socinians, and Deists, all agree here. People of all sects and denominations are truly blessed when they do the things which everyone knows and admires. A heavy penalty lies on those who do not do them. The woe is not explicitly expressed, but it is implied in Christ's words. The common Lord of all believers virtually addresses all Christendom here, saying, “You can see the sunlight of a perfect example; you have been made aware of a high and lovely ideal in life. Unbelieving moralists have never dreamed of anything like it. What are you doing with your light? Are you simply looking at it, and writing books about it, and bragging about it, and talking about it? Meanwhile, are you allowing people outside the church to surpass you in their compassion and philanthropy? If this is all you are doing with your knowledge, it will be more tolerable for unbelievers at the judgment than for you.”

One Who Knows, But Will Not Do
After Jesus reflected on this theme with His disciples, He followed it up with a word of apology for the suspicious tone with which it was given. No doubt, the disciples had felt it. He said, “I do not speak of all of you. I know the ones I have chosen; but it is that the Scripture may be fulfilled, 'He who eats My bread has lifted up his heel against Me.'” The remark may be paraphrased like this: “I have been hinting at the possibility that one can know what is right and yet not do anything about it. But I have not been implying this is true of everyone. I do not think so badly of you all that I imagine you are capable of deliberate and habitual neglect of what you know to be your duties. But there is one among you who is capable of this kind of conduct. I have chosen you Twelve. I know the character of every one of you. I said a year ago, after asking a question that hurt your feelings, that one of you had a devil (Jn. 6:66-70). Now, after giving you my suspicious thoughts, I say there is one among you whose character negatively illustrates its meaning. There is one who knows but will not do. He puts sentiment in the place of action and admiration.
in the place of imitation. This is one who, after he eats bread with Me as a familiar friend, will repay Me for all my kindness. He will not offer loving obedience but will lift up his heel against Me.” Jesus could put up with the weaknesses of sincere disciples but not with the Judas-character. In him, correct thinking and fine sentiment are combined with a false heart and practical laxity. Promise is offered in the place of performance. Speaking the right words is substituted for doing the appropriate deed. Jesus’ soul utterly abhorred this kind of character.

Is there any doubt that it was not in vain that these sincere disciples spent so much time with the One who was so exacting in His ideas? In later years, they really did strive to fulfill their Master’s will and to serve one another in love.