

“Do You Understand What I Have Done To You?”

John 13:1-17

SLIDE 1

Let me pray for us, and then we will spend some time considering this passage in John’s gospel together.

Pray

*We thank you heavenly Father, for inspiring all Scripture by your Holy Spirit. Help us by your Spirit so to hear your Holy Word now that we may be equipped for every good work, through your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. **AMEN.***

Introduction - How Dare We Approach God?

SLIDE 2

We have spent a lot of time together in prayer today. Of course, the theme of our gathering is prayer. We have praised God in prayer, confessed our sins to him, and we have made our requests known to him.

But how dare we come to the Sovereign God, the Creator of the Universe, as wicked and sinful human beings, presenting our requests to him, and expect him to hear us? How dare we wander into the throne room of heaven with our heads held high?

How dare we?

Well, listen to what Dr Timothy Keller reminds us in his excellent 2014 book, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*:

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“How could God be our intimate friend? How could we approach him with complete confidence? It is because God became like us, equally mortal and subject to suffering and death. He did it so we could be forgiven and justified by faith apart from our efforts and merits. That is why we can draw near.

Because in Jesus, God became human, he is not only the God on the other side of the chasm, he is the bridge over the gap. Thus he is the mediator of a new relationship with God that cannot fail because it is based on his faithfulness, not ours.”¹

What we have before us today in this part of John’s gospel is a record of a well-known event. But how often do we really consider the way God humbled and debased himself when he washed the feet of his disciples? How often are we stopped in our tracks because we realise how God himself made himself below us, in order to raise us up, for his glory?

Friends, this is message of the gospel. And it is truly *amazing grace*.

A passage like this calls us to raise our eyes when we look at Jesus. We will fail to understand what’s truly happening here unless we realise that Jesus Christ is really and fully God - the one in whom and through whom all things exist and have their being - even as he stands there with his robe on a chair and a towel around his waist in the upper room.

As we look at Jesus the Son of Man, we need to also see Jesus, the Son of God. After all, as Jesus himself says in the next chapter, ch14:

SLIDE 4

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

(John 14:6–7 ESV)

Washing Feet (John 13:1-11)

SLIDE 5

Understanding this will make us understand the impact that John intends in those first verses of our passage for today. These are words which ought to sound absolutely incredible:

“Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”

(John 13:1 ESV)

¹ p.75, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, by T. Keller ©2014

This simple act of foot washing, John says, was the Son of God demonstrating a deep, passionate and enduring love towards those who *belonged* to him. A love that he was willing to express even to Judas, despite his determination to betray him.

Why did Jesus exercise his love in this way? Surely he could have done something greater than wash his disciples' dirty, smelly feet?

Let's first understand what this foot-washing thing was all about.

In first century Palestinian society, it was an expected custom to wash the feet of your guests.

Roads were dusty and dirty, and most people wore open sandals. Usually, in a Jewish house, the non-Jewish house slaves would perform the foot washing.

Apparently, according to some rabbis, it was the duty of the wife to wash her husbands face, hands and feet before meals and before bed.

But, aside from the cultural necessity of foot washing, there was also a religious significance to washing feet. During a time of mourning, for instance, the feet were not washed. Strange then that Jesus should wash his disciples feet when he is about to go to the cross and the sheep are going to be scattered?

Or perhaps it isn't strange. Remember Jesus own words in John 16:

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"Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. ... So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you."

(John 16:20–22 ESV)

Another religious significance to foot washing is found in Exodus 30, speaking of the requirements for priests entering God's presence:

SLIDE 7

“When they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to burn a food offering to the LORD, they shall wash with water, so that they may not die. They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die.”

(Exodus 30:20–21 ESV)

This shouldn't strike us as strange. God is holy, and no unholiness can enter his presence.

Hence Isaiah's words, when he sees the Holy God:

SLIDE 8

“Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

(Isaiah 6:5 ESV)

SLIDE 9

This begins to make sense of the purpose behind Jesus washing his disciples' feet. He is not doing it for custom's sake, or for hygiene's sake. His action is intended to foreshadow what he will do the following day.

This is the meaning behind Jesus' words in v8:

“If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.”

(John 13:8 ESV)

You see friends, this is the heart of the gospel message. The heart of the gospel message is that God became man, humbling himself, laying aside his majesty for a time, to go to the cross of Calvary.

And he suffered and died there in order to pay the price we owed for our sin, in order to make those who have faith in him fit for God's presence.

In what he accomplished upon the cross, he washed us from sin, so that we might come to share with him, as our 'older brother', in all the goodness and blessing of the Father forever.

This is why it says in the book of Hebrews:

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“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

(Hebrews 10:19–22 ESV)

This is the reason why we can come to God today and bring our prayers to him. Not because we deserve to be in his presence, but because of what Christ has accomplished on our behalf, for the sake of God’s glory. When we pray “in Jesus’ name”, dear friends, it’s not a meaningless religious phrase, it’s the only way we can pray.

God Incarnate before Good Example

SLIDE 11

There is a danger of misunderstanding Jesus’ words in the final half of ch13:

“When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, “Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, 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 also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.”

(John 13:12–17 ESV)

The misunderstanding happens when we take a shortcut to Jesus’ example, bypassing the Incarnation.

You see, if we look to Jesus’ example as the example of a mere man, then Jesus stands alongside the many other moral models in our history, and is no different from Mahatma Gandhi, or Mother Theresa, or Nelson Mandela.

And if he is no different from these people, then his call to imitate him and do what he has done is not binding. We will be motivated to mimic him out of admiration perhaps, which is itself subjective, or maybe a desire to be seen as a moral model the way he is.

But if we recognise that Jesus is no ordinary man, but that this is God himself come down to earth in human skin, the Creator washing the feet of his Creation, then we will approach this whole idea of imitating Jesus very differently.

In fact, there's more too it, as we have said. This isn't merely about Jesus washing feet. Washing feet is an object lesson to make the disciples understand when he dies to wash their souls the next day.

When we realise that this is what Jesus was doing, when we realise that God himself humbled himself in such a way for our sake, then Jesus' example takes on a whole new meaning.

No longer do we mimic him out of admiration, but we obey him out of adoration.

This is the foundation for true worship - a lifestyle of worship towards the one is infinitely worthy of our praise and adoration because of what he has done for us.

Conclusion - Do You Understand?

SLIDE 12

The key verse of our morning is John 13:12, where Jesus says:

"Do you understand what I have done to you?"

(John 13:12 ESV)

Let me ask you today, as a challenge: do you understand what Jesus has done to you?

We are Christians here today, claiming the name of Christ, claiming in that name a restored relationship with our Creator through the atoning death of his dear Son. Do you understand then what Jesus has done to you?

Do you understand the extent of the suffering Jesus' willingly endured in your place, for your sin, in order that you might be reconciled to your Creator? What does that do to you? How does that make you feel? How does that make you feel towards Jesus himself?

Do you understand how completely Jesus has cleansed you, and made you fit for the presence of God? Do you understand how he has made you a son or a daughter where you were an enemy and a rebel? What does that do to you? How does that make you feel? How does that make you feel towards Jesus himself?

And if you understand what Jesus has done to you, what are you doing with it?

Jesus said to his disciples, later in this same chapter:

SLIDE 13

“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.”

(John 13:34–35 ESV)

On these words, Jesus is calling on his followers, then and now, to demonstrate a gospel-motivated love in the world in order that his gospel in us might be recognised.

All of us are here today to pray because we want God to transform our world. We see the suffering in the world around us and we long for restoration.

But we know that the only hope the people of our world have is in the gospel of Jesus Christ - not primarily in being restored to their world, not primarily in being restored to each other, but in being reconciled to their Creator.

As Christians therefore, we have a responsibility to get out into this suffering world as Jesus commands, and “wash feet”.

As we do this, let’s not just demonstrate the love of a mere man. Let’s demonstrate the gospel-motivated love of the incarnate God.