

John 13:2-17

Introduction

Last week we looked at the first verse of John chapter thirteen.

- John 13:1 — Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end [or, “to the end He loved them”].

This verse introduces not only our text for this morning, but the entire second half of John’s Gospel. If the first half of John emphasized Jesus’ saving mission to *the world*, the second half will emphasize the special love of Jesus for “*His own*.”

So we go on, now, to read in verse 2:

I. John 13:2 — During supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to hand Him over...

How does John know what was already in Judas’ heart? One reason is that it will become known later that Judas has already come to an agreement with the chief priests. They’ve already agreed to give Judas money if he will hand Jesus over to them in the absence of a crowd (cf. Mat. 26:14-16; Mk. 14:10-11; Lk. 22:3-6). Jesus knows this. He knows even now what’s in Judas’ heart. John as much as tells us He does — only not in the way we might have expected. John doesn’t say, “Jesus, knowing what Judas was planning...” Instead: “During supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him...”

II. John 13:3 — ...Jesus, knowing *that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God...*

Jesus sees Judas and his plans and purposes only in the light of God’s plans and purposes.

John follows up his reference to what the devil has put in Judas’ heart—namely, the decision to betray Jesus to His death—with a reference to Jesus’ knowledge that the Father has given all things into His hands and that He has come forth from God and was going back to God. Could there be any greater incongruity? Could there be any two realities more “opposed” to each other? To speak of the Father giving all things into Jesus’ hands (cf. Jn. 3:35) is to use the language of the most exalted kind of power and sovereignty and lordship. In the Bible, “hand” is often just a synonym for “power” and “sovereignty” (cf. Mat. 17:22; 26:45; Lk. 1:66; Jn. 10:28-29; Rev. 1:16).

- Acts 4:27-30 — “For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your **hand** and Your purpose predestined to occur. And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your

word with all confidence, while You extend Your **hand** to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.”

- 1 Peter 5:6 — Humble yourselves under the mighty **hand** of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time.

When John speaks of the Father having given all things into Jesus’ hands, the meaning is essentially that the Father has given all things into His “power.” *What* has the Father given into His power? “*All things.*” And what does this mean? We read in John chapter five:

- John 5:22 — “For not even the Father judges anyone, but **He has given all judgment to the Son, so that all will honor the Son** even as they honor the Father.”
- John 5:26–27 — “Just as the Father has life in Himself, even so **He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself**; and **He gave Him authority to execute judgment**, because He is the Son of Man.”

When John says that Jesus knew that the Father had given all things into His hands, this is the language of universal power and dominion and sovereignty.

Now, on the one hand, only one who partakes fully of all that the undivided God is could ever possess or wield universal lordship. And yet, on the other hand, only the incarnate Son could be “*given*” this prerogative of deity. Remember, we don’t divide Jesus into two persons. We must not allow the fact of the two distinct “natures” of Jesus (his humanity and his deity) to undermine the reality that **He is only one person**. And so we see that it’s only the *incarnate Son*—the **enfleshed Word** (John 1:14)—who could ever be **given universal power and dominion and sovereignty**. This is a wonderful mystery! This is the mystery of the incarnation.

Jesus knew that the Father had given all things into His hands, *and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God*. Here, also, is the language of universal dominion and sovereignty and lordship. Jesus will pray in John seventeen:

- John 17:5 (cf. 17:24) — “Now, Father, *glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.*”

On the one hand, only one who partakes fully of all that the undivided God is could ever rightfully ask to be glorified “together with” God or claim to have shared in the Father’s *glory* before the world was. On the other hand, only the incarnate Son could ever *pray* to the Father, *asking* that the Father would glorify Him together with Himself. *Who* knew that He had come forth from God? *Jesus* knew that **He** had come forth from God. Can we ask which “part” of Him had come forth from God—His humanity or His deity? On the one hand, we confess that the eternal Word *became* flesh in the fullness of *time* and that there was no human nature that came down out of heaven from God. On the other hand, it’s not enough to say only that the eternal Word came from God. That’s not enough! Instead, we confess that it was that glorious undivided Person of the incarnate Son—the enfleshed Word; Jesus *Himself*—who knew that **He** had come *from God* and that **He** was going *back to God*. Of whom else could such things ever be said?

So on the one hand, we emphasize that the Father gives *all things* into Jesus' hands (appropriate to His deity). On the other hand, we emphasize that the Father *gives* all things into Jesus' hands (appropriate to His true humanity). On the one hand, we emphasize that Jesus came from *God* and that He was going back to *God* (appropriate to His deity). On the other hand, we emphasize that Jesus *came from* God and that He was *going back to* God (appropriate to His true humanity). And yet in all this, there is only one, undivided *person* of whom every single one of these things can be said equally and with equal truth.

It's only in the light of *these things*—in the light of this mystery of Christ's person as the **incarnate Son**; the **enfleshed Word**—that we can understand the significance of these words (and also what happens next): “During supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him Jesus, knowing that the Father had *given* all things into His hands [universal power and dominion and sovereignty], and that He had come forth *from* God and was going back *to* God [glory and honor]...”

III. John 13:4-5 — ...got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.

Many might read this and think to themselves, “What a wonderful *example* for me to follow”; and that would be right as far as it goes. The problem is, it's not at all the first thing or the primary thing that we should be thinking. When *Jesus* lays aside His garments and girds Himself with a towel and washes the disciples' feet, this is *not* first of all an *example*, but rather first of all a **revelation** – a revelation of the meaning of His **person**, of who He *is* and what He has come to *do* and to *accomplish*. Here in this act is *not* first of all an example for us, but rather a revelation of what the incarnation means – of what it means that the eternal Word has taken to Himself our “flesh”—our true and full humanity.

John describes the scene vividly and in detail (seven verbs in rapid succession) as one who was there and who personally witnessed and experienced these things. Jesus *got up* from supper; He *laid aside* His garments; He *took* a towel; He *girded Himself* with the towel. If we're the disciples, all of our most basic sensibilities are being offended. This is the dress of the lowliest and the most menial kind of slave. This is the dress appropriate only to the most lowly and the most menial kind of service. Dressed in this way, He *poured water* into the basin; He *began to wash* the disciples' feet; He *wiped their feet* with the towel with which He was girded. I think there's a sense in which we've probably romanticized and sentimentalized the washing of someone else's feet. There's nothing particularly “low” about this in our culture, and in Christian circles it could even be a “noble” thing to do. But we must by all means learn to see this differently.

In the Old Testament, water might be brought for someone to wash their own feet (cf. 2 Sam. 11:8; 2 Kings 19:24; Song. 5:3), but their feet were not to be washed by anyone else – not even by the household servants, unless they were the very lowest of slaves.

➤ Genesis 18:4 — [Abraham said to the men,] “Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree.”

- Genesis 19:2 — [Lot said to the men,] “My lords, please turn aside to your servant’s house and spend the night and wash your feet.”
- Genesis 24:32 — [Abraham’s steward] came to the house [of Laban]... and there was water to wash his feet and the feet of the men who were with him.
- Judges 19:21 — So [the man of Ephraim] brought [the Levite] into his house... And they washed their feet, and ate and drank.

When Abigail met David on the mountain path, we’re told:

- 1 Samuel 25:41 — [Abigail] rose and bowed with her face to the ground and said, “Behold, your handmaid is a servant to wash the feet of the servants of my lord.”

Abigail isn’t offering to literally wash the feet of David’s servants. Neither does she expect to be asked to wash their feet as David’s wife. She’s using the ultimate example of the lowest work of the lowest slave to express the “proper” and “culturally acceptable” posture or attitude in these circumstances (cf. Judg. 6:15; 1 Sam. 9:21; 18:18).

Is the refusal to ever wash someone else’s feet a sign of self-importance? Is it automatically a sign of pride and arrogance? Not at all! It was just a recognition of the *fitness* of things – of what was right and appropriate (cf. Carson). When a person allowed his feet to be washed by the lowest and most menial of slaves, does this automatically mean that he was “lording it over” this slave” and arrogantly treating him as less than human? Not at all! This was just a legitimate cultural recognition of the various “stations” in life. The Old Testament saints were not less godly because they didn’t wash other people’s feet. This was just “the way” of things (cf. Lk. 17:7-9). It’s only when we really understand this that we’ll be able fully to empathize with the disciples and think how they must have been thinking. In and of itself, there was nothing at all “noble” about this act. There wasn’t remotely any way to romanticize or sentimentalize this act. It was simply not “fitting.” It was not right or appropriate. More than that, it was grating and abrasive to every reasonable sensibility (cf. Carson). Maybe now, then, we can understand Peter’s response.

IV. John 13:6 — So He came to Simon Peter. He said to Him, “Lord, do You wash my feet?”

Should we condemn Peter for being too “proud” to let Jesus wash his feet? Luke tells us that “a dispute also arose among the [the disciples (apparently around this time)], as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest” (Lk. 22:24). In our culture this would be a bald-faced example of arrogance. We wonder how the disciples of Jesus could be so unashamedly proud and self-seeking. It’s reprehensive. It’s despicable. But I think when we respond like this we’re really missing the picture. I’m not saying there was no pride in the disciples’ hearts, but we do need to understand that their dispute was to some extent “legitimate” in light of the cultural “fitness” of things and the various assigned stations in life. The Bible recognizes that there are the “least” and there are the “greatest” (cf. Jer. 6:13; 44:12; Jon. 3:5; Acts 8:10; Heb. 8:11). And so in a sense the disciples were disputing among themselves about the “fitness” of things in the kingdom (cf. Mk. 10:35-37). It’s this sense of “fitness” that leads Peter to say to Jesus: “Lord, do You wash my feet?”

In the Greek, “You” and “mine” are emphatic and placed in direct opposition to each other: “You?!? Mine?!? Wash the feet?!?” This isn’t necessarily about pride or power or self-importance, or even about humility; it’s just about what’s fitting and what’s right. Not even the most righteous kings of old—not even David himself—ever did such a thing. We might assume that even Moses, who in his day was more “humble” than all people who were on the face of the earth (Num. 12:3), never did such a thing. “You?!? Mine?!? Wash the feet?!?” There’s a sense in which the whole world, for Peter—and for the rest of the disciples—is at this moment being turned upside down. And we should be able, now, to sympathize fully, and even empathize with what they must be thinking and how they must be feeling.

If this act of Jesus was *primarily* about setting an example of humility, then the disciples could legitimately respond—even as Peter *does*: “This is not about humility. It’s just the shattering of all that is right and of all that is fitting!” But if this is *not* intended primarily as an example of humility, then what *is* it?

V. John 13:7 — Jesus answered and said to [Peter], “What I do you do not realize *now*, but you will understand *after these things*.”

Do you see what Jesus is telling Peter? It’s *impossible* for you to understand what I’m doing now. Only after these things—only later—will you be *able* to understand. Why? Why can’t Jesus just explain everything now? What would be so hard about that? The answer is that there are no words sufficient to explain. The answer is that this foot-washing can be fully understood only in the light of an *event* that has not yet happened.

But Peter doesn’t understand why he shouldn’t be able to understand:

VI. John 13:8a — Peter said to [Jesus], “Never shall You wash my feet!”

Doesn’t his response make perfect sense to us now? Can you feel how Peter is emboldened by the rightness—even the righteousness—of his cause?

VII. John 13:8b–9 — Jesus answered [Peter], “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.” Simon Peter said to Him, “Lord, then wash not only my feet, but also my hands and my head.”

Peter thinks he understands, but he doesn’t. He thinks that this is about a ritual or ceremonial cleansing as a sign of spiritual cleansing. So if cleansing is what this is about, then of course he wants Jesus to wash not just his feet, but also his hands and his head. Don’t only wash my feet like a slave, wash my hands and my head, too, like a master who provides cleansing for his servants.

Can you see how Peter is thinking? He’s trying to turn his world right-side-up again. He’s trying to see this foot-washing as something that’s somehow “fitting.” He’s trying to avoid what he’s not yet able to understand. And in the process, he’s suggesting for the second time—without meaning to—that he knows better than Jesus: “Lord, then wash not only my feet, but also my hands and my head.”

I believe the key to understanding the flow of this whole passage is to see that the next verses are “peripheral” to the main point. They’re a digression or a “detour,” as it were. Peter is happy to think that the main point might be *cleansing*, and so for the sake of correction Jesus entertains this idea just for a moment.

VIII. John 13:10–11 — Jesus said to [Peter], “He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you [pl.] are clean, but not all of you.” For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, “Not all of you are clean.”

There’s much that the disciples still don’t understand, but their faith in God and His promise of salvation which they’ve demonstrated by believing in Jesus and following Him means that they’re already clean—all except Judas. In so far as Peter is thinking of “cleansing,” then Jesus would have him know that he’s already been washed! He’s already clean! That’s the wonderful encouragement! Therefore, in so far as Peter is thinking of cleansing, his request is misguided and unnecessary, for “he who has bathed needs only to wash his feet.” That’s the correction. Peter must learn that even in His sincere zeal, he can never “outdo” Jesus. The main point, therefore, is not still needing to have our “feet” cleansed through the continual confessing of our sins even after we’re saved (cf. 1 Jn. 1:9). The main point is that Peter is already clean and that therefore his “exuberant” (cf. Carson) request—no matter how sincere it may be—is misguided and unnecessary. Peter cannot yet have his world turned “right-side-up” again. He cannot escape the reality that Jesus has dressed Himself as a slave and washed *not* his head and *not* his hands, but *only* his *feet*. Peter cannot avoid what he is not yet able to understand.

What did Jesus say?—“What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand *after these things*.” When Jesus has been crucified and raised, *then* it will be seen that when *Jesus* laid aside His garments and girded Himself with a towel and washed the disciples’ feet, this was first of all a *revelation* of the *meaning* of His own *person*, of *who* He *is* and in that light of *what* He has come to *do* and to *accomplish*. This helps us to see that while there is a sense in which it would *not* have been fitting for *David* to wash the feet of his servants, it *was* fitting that *Jesus* should wash the feet of His disciples. When Jesus has been crucified and raised, *then* it will be seen that this *act* was first of all a *revelation* of what the *incarnation* means – of what it means that the *eternal Word* has taken to Himself our “*flesh*”—our true and full *humanity*. When Jesus girds Himself as a slave and then performs the lowliest service of the lowliest slave, this act is a revelation not just of Christ’s humanity but even of His *deity*. In other words, the **only way** that this act can make any sense at all is to understand that the one who performs it is the **incarnate Son**—the **enfleshed Word**—who has *come forth from God* and is *going back to God*. What does Jesus say to Peter? “If I do not wash you, you have no part with *Me*” – You have no part with *who I am*, and therefore with *what I have come to do* (cf. Phil. 2:6-8).

But now we could ask, Why is this foot-washing necessary? Won’t the cross itself, which is now only hours away, make this point just as powerfully and even *more* powerfully? Why does Jesus wash the disciples’ feet? Because Jesus wants His disciples to understand “after these things” what the meaning of His *person* is—and what the meaning of His *cross-work* is—for life lived in His kingdom. So we go on to read in verses 12-16:

IX. John 13:12–16 — So when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments and reclined at the table again, He said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? 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. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him.”

Only when we’ve understood this foot-washing in the light of Christ’s *person* can it truly be for us the *example* that Jesus intends it to be. And even now, the point is not so much “humility” as it is the brand new, inside out and upside down “*fitness* of things” in Christ’s kingdom. He is the ***incarnate Son***—the ***enfleshed Word***—*so that* He might give His *life* as a ransom *for* many (cf. Mat. 20:28). Therefore, life lived in His kingdom must reflect who He is (His person) and what He has done (cf. Phil. 2:1-5). *Therefore*, the greatest among you shall wash the feet of his slaves. *Therefore*, the greatest among you shall be the slave who washes your feet (Mat. 20:25-28; 23:11; Mk. 9:35; Lk. 22:26).

Only in the light of Christ’s person and of His work on the cross can we see the beautiful, mysterious “*fitness*” of His washing the disciples’ feet and so, now, the wonderful “*fitness*” of doing to each other as He has done to us. Only in the light of Christ’s person and of His work on the cross can the kingdom life which appeared at first to be inside out and upside down be seen as the only life that is truly “right side up.” And so now we can listen with *understanding* – with full obedience and joy – to Jesus’ words to us:

X. John 13:17 — “If you *know* these things, you are ***blessed*** if you *do* them.”