

John 13:2-17 (Part 2)

Introduction

Last week we looked at the famous account of Jesus washing the feet of His disciples. Being so famous and so well-known can sometimes mean that it's easier to take things for granted or even to miss some fundamental aspect of the meaning of a passage. I suggested last week that this is exactly the case (to some extent) with the "popular" understanding of the foot-washing in John 13. It's not that the popular understanding is wrong, *per se*, but rather that it comes at this passage from the wrong direction. Before we can understand the power of this foot-washing as an example for us to imitate (which is clearly what Jesus intends for it to be; Jn. 13:15), we must first understand this foot-washing as the revelation of a brand new "condition" or "state" of things in the Messiah's kingdom. This isn't just a technicality. It's fundamental to truly understanding this passage and even fundamental to seeing the power and the beauty of the kingdom itself.

So with all these things in mind, we're going to come back to what we looked at last week and seek to understand it more clearly – for the sake of our edification and the glory of God. We're going to start out by making two important observations. Or we could say that we're going to start out by looking at two important clues.

I. The meaning of the foot-washing cannot be understood apart from Christ's *PERSON*.

John prefaces his account of Jesus washing the feet of His disciples with these words:

- John 13:3–5 — 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**, 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.

Have you ever asked yourself why John so purposefully and "carefully" includes this preface? What is John "driving" at? Is he saying that Jesus felt "secure" enough to do this? Is he saying that Jesus, being secure in His "greatness," felt free to wash the disciples' feet? It should be obvious to us that this isn't the point. The point isn't that Jesus had no insecurities because this already goes completely without saying.

What John wants us to see is that this foot-washing is *rooted in*—and is therefore also a *revelation of*—the *person* of Jesus as the incarnate Son and the enfleshed Word. The point is not *just* a *subjective attitude* of humility that Jesus has, but the *objective fact* of His "humiliation" – and therefore even of who He is. In other words, it's only in the context of who Jesus *is* that what He *does* can make any "sense." We'll see why this is in just a moment, but for right now, it's just important that we give this preface its proper weight – its full meaning and significance. This foot-washing isn't *just* about giving us a beautiful example of a humble attitude (subjective). John sees it as a revelation of the infinite mystery of Christ's *person* (objective).

Now we come to the second observation that we need to make (or the second clue).

II. The meaning of the foot-washing cannot be understood apart from the progress of *REDEMPTIVE HISTORY*.

- John 13:7 — Jesus... said to [Peter], “What I do you do not realize now [i.e., ‘you cannot realize now’; the perfect tense communicates a sense of final impossibility], but you will understand after these things.”

Jesus is saying to Peter: By the very nature of the case, it’s *impossible* for you to understand what I’m doing now. Only after these things—only later—will you be *able* to understand. Now if this was mainly about setting an example of a humble attitude, then Jesus could have easily explained things to Peter right then and there, and Peter could easily have understood right then and there. There’s nothing impossible about understanding an example of a humble attitude. So what is it that explains why in the very nature of the case, it’s *impossible* for Peter to understand what Jesus is doing? There’s no mentally, morally, or spiritually possible way for him to understand. Why should this be? What should he only be able to understand *later*?

Jesus isn’t saying that Peter is so hopelessly blinded by pride right now that he won’t be able to understand until later when he’s repented of his pride! The obstacle to Peter’s understanding is not something *in him* (subjective). The obstacle, Jesus says, was that present point in redemptive history in which Peter was living (objective). The obstacle was the date on the calendar. It’s too soon for any of the disciples to understand now because the reality of Christ’s *person* (objective) has not yet been translated into the reality of Christ’s *kingdom* (objective). What Jesus did would only be able to make “sense” in the context of a kingdom that had not yet arrived, and an understanding of the person of Christ that could only be had once that kingdom had, in fact, arrived. We see, then, that Jesus is not blaming Peter or holding Peter responsible for his inability to understand what He is doing. Instead, Jesus is calling Peter to accept what He is doing *by faith*, knowing that though it’s impossible for him to understand now, the progress of redemptive history and the coming of Christ’s kingdom will soon change that.

It’s these two observations or clues that allow us to truly “make sense” of Peter’s response to Jesus:

III. Peter cannot understand the meaning of the foot-washing because He does not yet fully understand the nature of Christ’s *PERSON* and because of his current place in the progress of *REDEMPTIVE HISTORY*.

- John 13:6, 8 — “Lord, do You wash my feet? ... “Never shall You wash my feet!”

Why does Peter respond like this? Is this a sign of his sinful arrogance (he would *never* wash the feet of his own servants and therefore Jesus must *not* wash his feet)? Does Peter not “understand” an attitude of “humility”? Is this what Jesus was saying Peter can’t “understand”? But if this is true—if it’s Peter’s pride and arrogance that compels him to recoil at the thought of Jesus washing his feet—does this mean that other more humble and godly people *could have* understood if they had been the ones whose feet Jesus was washing? Jesus clearly implies that *no*

one could understand what He was doing until later – until after the establishment of His kingdom (death, resurrection, ascension, enthronement). If no one living at that time could have understood—if not even the greatest and most humble saints who lived prior to Christ’s kingdom could have understood—does this mean that all the saints prior to Christ’s kingdom were by default less humble and more proud than we are, or that it was impossible for them to be as humble as it’s now possible for us to be? Certainly not! Peter’s objections may reflect a lack of faith and an unwillingness to submit himself *by* faith to something he can’t yet understand, but they don’t necessarily reflect any spiritual blindness or pride on his part.*

Peter responds as he does because, as Jesus Himself said, neither Peter nor anyone else living prior to the establishment of Christ’s kingdom and the full revelation of His person could possibly understand. Doesn’t this cause you to be asking this question: *Why* is it that we can understand today what Peter could not possibly understand at that time? What is it about the arrival of Christ’s kingdom and the full revelation of His person that suddenly changes everything? What is going on here!

IV. The foot-washing is not first of all about a “subjective” attitude of humility, but about an actual “objective” status or station in life.

We need to understand that what Jesus does in washing the disciples’ feet is reflective of a reality and of a set of conditions that will obtain only *after* the kingdom has come and only *in* that kingdom (cf. Mat. 18:1-4). Let’s put it the other way around. What Jesus does in washing the disciples’ feet is reflective of a reality and of a set of conditions that couldn’t possibly have existed prior to the coming of the kingdom – not even in the theocratic “kingdom” of Israel.

Remember that 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.”

Was Abraham too proud to wash their feet himself or even to have one of his servants wash their feet?

- 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.”

Was Lot too proud to wash their feet himself or even to have one of his servants wash their feet? But the Bible presents both Abraham and Lot as the perfect examples of selfless hospitality.

- Genesis 24:32 (Judg. 19:21) — [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.

* When Jesus speaks of “the rulers of the Gentiles lord[ing] it over them” (Mat. 20:25-28) He is taking the extreme (unbelieving arrogance) and contrasting this with the new reality in His kingdom. Jesus is not denying the legitimacy of “lesser” and “greater” stations in life outside of the kingdom (cf. Lk. 17:7-9).

Was Laban too proud to wash the feet of the men who had come to him or to have any of his servants wash their feet?

Is the refusal to ever wash someone else's feet always a sign of self-importance? Is this always a sign of pride and arrogance? Not at all! Prior to and/or outside of Christ's kingdom, it was just a recognition of the fitness of things—of what was right and appropriate and what *is* right and appropriate in a very different context. When a person allowed his feet to be washed only by the lowest and most menial of slaves, does this always mean that he was “lording it over” this “slave” and arrogantly treating him as less than human? Not at all! Prior to and outside of Christ's kingdom this was—and still *is*—a legitimate cultural recognition of the various “stations” in life. Remember what Jesus asked the disciples in Luke chapter seventeen:

- Luke 17:7-9 — “Will any one of you who has a slave plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank the slave because he did what was commanded?”

This “master” is not being heartless and arrogant. Jesus assumes that in that particular context, the mentality of the “master” toward his slave is perfectly fitting and appropriate.

Let's take the example of king David. It could never have been fitting for David to wash the feet of his servants. This doesn't mean that David could not have had a humble attitude toward his servants or that David could not have been a humble and gentle shepherd of his servants. “Who” washed “who's” feet was not really about humility (subjective), but about assigned stations in life (objective). If David washed the feet of his servants this would be a wholly inappropriate subversion of these assigned stations in the theocratic kingdom of Israel. You could even say that for the king who washed his servants' feet, this would be something almost immoral – at the very least reckless and foolhardy. What makes it difficult for us to see this is our modern day “cultural” obsession with so-called “equality” as well as our failure to see the absolutely unique and unparalleled nature of the Messiah's kingdom.

Peter was viewing Jesus actions in the light of the perfectly legitimate realities of the Old Covenant theocratic kingdom of Israel. In that context, what Jesus does—if it had been done by anyone else—would have been foolhardy and reckless. But what is it that happens in the Messiah's kingdom to make what before would have been foolhardy and reckless into the very wisdom of God? Jesus, the one who existed in the form of **God** assumed the *station* of a **slave** not just by performing the service of a slave (washing feet) but even in His very *person* – by being born in the likeness of men; by becoming the *incarnate Son* and the *enfleshed Word* (cf. Phil. 2:6-8). It is the *person* of Jesus as our redeemer and Messiah that renders His *act* in washing the disciples' feet not immoral and not even foolhardy, but rather mysteriously fitting and wonderful and beautiful. In the *person* of Jesus, **God** has assumed the *station* of a “**slave**” for the sake of our redemption. And so now it's the *person* of Jesus as our King that redefines the very meaning of “greatness” *in* His **kingdom**. At home, the “master” must still be waited upon by his “servant” at the dinner table. That remains “fitting” (cf. Jer. 6:13; 44:12; Jon. 3:5; Acts 8:10; Heb. 8:11). But in church the master and his servant come together at the Lord's table

as equals. More than that, in the context of this kingdom community, the “greatest” is now the one who is not merely “humble” (as all the Old Testament saints were) but the one who is always assuming even the *station* of a slave toward all those around him.

- Matthew 23:11 — “The greatest among you shall be your slave.”
- Mark 9:35 — “If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and slave of all.”

Conclusion

Here is the absolutely unique and unparalleled nature of life in Christ’s kingdom – wholly rooted in the unique and unparalleled nature of Christ’s person. Here is the astonishing miracle and beauty of life in Christ’s kingdom – wholly rooted in the miracle and beauty of Christ’s person. And here also is the necessity of a radical rebirth—of being born from above—if we would ever “see” and “enter into” this kingdom of God (cf. Jn. 3:3, 5). Now maybe we can more fully appreciate and understand these words of Jesus which, at the time, couldn’t possibly be understood by anyone – not even by the most humble of all the saints of old:

- John 13:12–16 — 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.”

These verses call us all to a subjective attitude of humility, but that, in itself, is nothing new. What *is* new is that these verses call us to an attitude of humility that is rooted now in our objective status as “slaves” to one another in the kingdom of Christ, who *Himself* took the form of a slave in order that we might be citizens of His kingdom. Paul puts these things together in Philippians chapter two:

- Philippians 2:1–11 — Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. [Subjective attitude... rooted in objective station:] Have this mind in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. [God exchanges the objective station of a slave with the objective station of a sovereign king:] For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

- Matthew 23:12 — “Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.”

As those who have entered into Christ’s kingdom, *we* can listen now with *understanding* – with full obedience and joy – to Jesus’ words to us:

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