

life group study guide

ME TO WE: I LAY ME DOWN

April 14, 2013



John 13:1-17

Introduction

Before we look at this passage, consider these questions and one story:

Who do you think you are? Are you your own, or do you belong to someone else?

Who do you think Jesus is?

Is there anything you wouldn't do for your son or daughter or most cherished loved one? Is there anything you wouldn't do for Jesus?

What job or task would you "draw the line at?" I.e., refuse to do? Why?

What are the lowliest and dirtiest jobs in the world?

You can discuss all of these now if you have time, but let's take a brief look at the last question. Googling "10 worst jobs," "10 most humiliating jobs," etc., will make most of you thankful for whatever job you have, but for me, the following example is the worst:

Rakesh Sahu is an "untouchable" – a member of the lowest caste in India. He works in the sanitation department of Calcutta, cleaning out the city's sewers. On a regular basis, Rakesh sits in a low crouch at the bottom of a seven-foot-deep manhole, sloshing away in a swirl of human waste and sediment. Equipped with a hoe and a steel bar, and wearing only a pair of loose purple underpants, Rakesh empties the thick black sludge from a clogged sewer into a bucket that his fellow crew members hoist up and dump in the middle of a narrow road. A small mountain of decaying excrement accumulates between the manhole and a rickety wooden vegetable cart. Two co-workers reach down and yank Rakesh out by his sore, extended arms, his body splattered with putrid muck. At 27, with a wife, three young daughters and a monthly income of about \$100, he has been a sewage worker for the Delhi Jal (Water) Board for the past 10 years.

Think about Rakesh next time you are having a bad day at the office.

Background

John 13:1-17 is the well known story of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples during the Last Supper on the Thursday evening shortly before His arrest and crucifixion. Jesus knew what lay ahead of Him in the next few hours, and, as His prayers at Gethsemane show us, was not exactly looking forward to it. What does it mean then that Jesus deliberately chooses this task at this time? Let's take a quick look at the background of the practice and set the scene before we study the text.

1. The Time and Place: The Upper Room in Jerusalem at the Last Supper on Thursday evening – the evening before His crucifixion. In just a few hours He would be arrested. All four gospels record

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parts of this Passover meal. It is here that Jesus institutes the Lord's Supper (Communion), but only John records the foot washing. The other accounts are: **Matt. 26:17-35; Mark 14:12-31; Luke 22:7-38. If time permits, read the Luke text, esp. Luke 22:24-27.**

2. **Who:** Jesus and His twelve disciple, including Judas.

3. **What is Foot Washing?:** Pretty much just what it sounds like. A largely sandal-only population living in a largely unpaved and semi-arid environment made for dirty feet and fostered the social custom of foot washing. When someone entered a home, they would usually have their feet washed by a servant, or by someone in the host's family (typically the wife or a daughter), or by the host, or at least be offered the water for washing. It was expected and was considered a breach of etiquette if not offered, as Luke's account of Jesus at Simon the Pharisee's house shows (**Luke 7:36-50, esp. vss. 44-45**). It was considered a humble task and therefore beneath the station of any "important" person. When John the Baptist wanted to compare his unworthiness in comparison to Christ, he could think of no lower task than untying Christ's sandal (which of course had to be done before foot washing, **John 1:27**). Foot washing is practiced today in Catholic, Orthodox, and some Protestant churches, especially during the week before Easter. **Have you been a part of a church that practiced foot washing? If so, what can you tell the group about it?**

4. **What happened in this instance?:** If you remember any of the context of the story (the room and meal arrangement is recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke – see the texts under #1 above), Jesus had arranged to eat the Passover meal with His disciples by renting or borrowing the upper room of a house in Jerusalem. Two of His disciples made the preparations (food, wine, etc.). So, there is really no host or servant in the room – just Jesus and the twelve. Apparently, none of the twelve offered to perform the task (maybe because of the attitudes of some of the disciples even at this meal – see **Luke 22:24-27**), so Jesus uses the situation as an opportunity to teach.

What This Text Teaches

It is very easy to read this passage and just take from it that we should do our best to follow Christ's example of humble service. Certainly that is true, but it is really important to note what else God reveals to us in these verses. In fact, what this passage tells us about who Christ is and about His work is just as key as the example He gives. There are at least three lessons here:

1. **Jesus Knows, John 13:1-3** – Twice in these verses we are told that "Jesus knew." First, He *"knew that His hour had come to leave this world and return to His Father"* (vs. 1). Second, He *"knew that the Father had given Him authority over everything"* (vs. 3). Even though Christ had the limitations of a human while on earth, He knew everything He needed to know through His communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit (see **John 2:24 and 3:34**). There were no surprises. He carried out the Father's plan and no other power in heaven or on earth could prevent it.

Q: Jesus speaks in this text as if His saving work is as good as done. What does that "sureness" mean to you?

Q: What is the *"authority over everything?"* (see **Philippians 2:5-11**)

Q: Jesus' knowledge also included Judas' betrayal (vss. 2, 11). Do you ever think that you can fool God or that perhaps He doesn't know your heart? Why might people think this way?

Q: Think about what Christ knows as He comes to the feet of each disciple: Peter who would deny, Thomas who would doubt, Judas who would betray, the other nine who would all flee after His arrest. What might Christ be thinking as he washed those feet? Any other thoughts?

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2. **Jesus Saves, John 13:6-11** – There is no record of any comment from any of the disciples as Jesus begins to wash their feet until He gets to Simon Peter. Peter protests first with a question, *“Are you going to wash my feet?”* He was incredulous. As we already saw, foot washing was the job of the lowest person in the house. How could His Lord be doing this? (Notice that Peter did not ask to take over!) Second, Peter emphatically says that Jesus would *“never ever wash my feet!”* All of us, but some more than others, like to tell God what He can or cannot do with us or for us or to us. As C.S. Lewis once said, “We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven.” For Peter and those of us too proud to accept what Christ has done and is doing for us, He responds with a clear warning: *“Unless I wash you, you won’t belong to me.”* Obviously, in this verse Jesus is talking to Peter about much more than foot washing. He is telling Peter that he needs the washing of Jesus’ blood for spiritual cleansing. There is no other way. We cannot come to Jesus on our own terms or by our own merit. *“There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved”* (Acts 4:12). Jesus’ **Number 1** priority in the Incarnation was to provide a means of salvation for sinners! *“This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”* (1 Timothy 1:15).

Q: What role does Peter (and we) play in the washing? Who does the washing? Who provides the “water?”

Q: What other means do people try to “come to Jesus” by?

Q: All cults have a distorted picture of Jesus and salvation by grace – often described as “Jesus and _____” (fill in the blank). Do you ever attempt to substitute anything for God’s grace? Do you ever try to “earn” it?

3. **Jesus Serves, John 13:4-5, 12-17** – When people refuse or ignore certain unpleasant tasks, it is usually because they think they are too good or too important or too dignified for such work. And we are wrong. We are all creatures who will return to dust – from the President of the United States to Rakesh Sahu the sewer cleaner. But note the following about Jesus’ service:
- A. Service is of utmost importance. Jesus interrupted the meal for it (*“So He got up from the table,”* vs. 4-5)! We know it was during the meal because they were still eating in verse 26. Everyone else ignored the job that should have been done. Jesus did it and used it to teach the disciples about serving His church.
 - B. Jesus acknowledges that He indeed is “Teacher” and “Lord,” but He serves anyway. If anyone was “too important” to serve, it was the Son of God. But He says *“I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you”* (vs. 15).

Q: Picture the upper room during this meal and try to put yourself in any of the disciples’ place? What would you be thinking as Jesus picked up the basin of water and the towel?

A. Oh crap, I should be doing this. B. Why isn’t Thomas doing this? He has the least faith. C. I knew we should have hired a servant. D. I don’t get it. If He is God, how can He be doing this? E. None of the above – (ok, then what’s your idea?

Even though some churches still practice literal foot washing, it is most likely that Jesus was not commanding it as a literal practice for the church to follow, because it is not mentioned in Acts or in any of the Epistles. However, He is commanding an attitude of humility and actual service in action. As one writer has said, “Jesus has washed the feet of Peter who will deny Him, of Thomas who will doubt Him, and of Judas who will betray Him. He has more in mind here than an ordinance of foot washing . . . I think that the Lord has a far greater matter before us here.” **What might be the equivalent of foot washing in the church today? What are the jobs that no one wants to do? When you turn down or ignore a “dirty” job, is it because**

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you feel inadequate or because you feel the job is inadequate for you?

Takeaways and Challenges

Here are some characteristics of Jesus' service as He washed the disciples' feet.

1. It was humble and lowly service. It required Him to kneel and to "dirty" His hands.
2. It was useful service. It served the purpose of cleaning dirty feet. It was not just a ceremony or sacrament. All of us as students hated "busy work." This was not.
3. It was a task that anyone in the room could have done – but didn't. A lot of undone jobs are like that. They don't require special ability, just willingness.
4. It was gracious service to all who were there, even Judas. Remember, Jesus Christ knew the coming failures of each disciple. We are not to serve only the "deserving" (if there are any).
5. It was not *apparently* "spiritual" or "important" service, yet it takes up one half of one of John's twenty chapters. Many of us like the ministries where we are "recognized," but this hum-drum kind of service is *apparently* quite important in the eyes of God.

Finally, here are some questions and commitments to consider in response to God's Word:

1. How can I commit to "foot washing" today? What undone and unwanted job(s) can I do?
2. What will I do to find an opportunity to serve? The opportunities are definitely there, but may require a little digging.
3. What selfish and self-seeking attitudes do I need to repent of and ask God to change?
4. Is there someone in the church who is overworked and who I can help?
5. **Have I allowed Jesus Christ to wash me? Or do I think I can somehow earn salvation?**
Service, even the most selfless service, does not save. The kind of service that God desires is always and only a response to the salvation provided by His grace alone.

"He gave His life to free us from every kind of sin, to cleanse us, and to make us His very own people, totally committed to doing good deeds" (Titus 2:14)