

# Take up the Towel

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, we're continuing on in our journey through the Gospel of John, and we're coming to chapter 13 this morning. This is a very unique section of John's Gospel.

Unlike the other Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John is about to give us five chapters, all of which happen in one evening, the evening of the Last Supper, the evening of Jesus' betrayal. And this is amazing. The best storytellers know when to quickly move the story along and when to really slow things down in order to help us see what's most important in the story.

And that's what John is doing here for us. Almost a quarter of John's Gospel describes one evening in Jesus' life. So we have to know that what we're about to read here is very important.

What's in these five chapters from 13 to 17? I'm just going to summarize it briefly. First of all, John tells us what happened before the Last Supper. Then John tells us about Judas, the betrayer, and what happened with him at the table that night.

[ 1 : 10 ] Then after that, Jesus goes on at length, teaching the disciples, encouraging them, telling them about what's soon to happen for them. And finally, sometime before Jesus is arrested in the garden, there's a whole chapter telling us what Jesus was praying that night.

So these are very special moments in the story of Jesus. We heard last week what some of Jesus' last words were to the public before his death. But now John is giving us Jesus' last words to his disciples.

This is almost like a sort of backstage pass, an invitation for you and I to come into the house where Jesus sat and ate his last meal with the disciples and to hear all that was said in those final hours. So let's begin by reading, starting in John 13, verse 1. It was just before the Passover festival.

Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father.

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus.

[ 2 : 31 ] Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God. So he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.

After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. So John tells us that this was just before the Passover.

The translation on screen says Passover festival, but the same word can also mean feast, as in the special meal that the Israelites would eat together every year on the day of Passover.

And this is probably what John means. This is the evening of Passover. And John gives us a little bit of a peek into what's going on in the heart and mind of Jesus at this moment.

He says, Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father.

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

[ 3 : 41 ] It's not as though Jesus' betrayal and arrest and death just came out of nowhere and caught Jesus by surprise. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father.

Up until this point in the story, we've heard a lot from Jesus about how he has come into the world, how he has been sent into the world by his Father. But now we hear that Jesus is about to leave this world and go to his Father.

And we might be wondering, if we imagine ourselves there in the room with the disciples, what do you mean, Jesus? Leave this world? Go to the Father?

Like how? Is this referring to Jesus' death and his spirit going to be with the Father after he dies? Or is this referring to Jesus ascending to heaven over a month later?

For the moment, we're going to leave those questions unanswered. Let's wonder about them, just as the disciples did. And they're going to actually ask about this in the conversation this very evening.

[ 4 : 52 ] John's main point here is that Jesus knows that this is the hour. He knows that he's right now having his last moments with his disciples before he dies and departs.

Think about this for a moment. Imagine what it would be like to know for certain that in less than 24 hours you would die.

What would you do with that last day of your life? Who would you want to spend it with? What might you want to talk about with that person, those people?

What might you do with them? Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father.

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. Jesus spends these final hours with his own, his disciples, his friends, his closest followers, those that he has chosen, his sheep.

[ 6 : 12 ] And I love how John says this. Having loved his own who were in the world. Do you hear that? It's as though John is thinking back over all the time that he has had with Jesus up until now.

And what does John remember from his days with Jesus? What does he say about this whole time up until now? He remembers being loved by Jesus.

Being cared for. Valued. Treasured. It's as though John is saying he had loved us all along right from the start.

but now this evening in these last hours we knew, we felt that again. He loved us right up to the end. Right up to his death and departure.

Verse 2. The evening meal was in progress and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. So John tells us that the meal's already been served.

[ 7 : 27 ] It's about to begin and along with that a plot to betray Jesus has already been served as well. John says it quite strongly.

A literal translation would be something like this. Already the devil having put it into the heart of Judas that he should betray Jesus. Jesus. This is not just a wicked man or wicked men plotting against Jesus.

This is the devil himself going after the son of God. Verse 3. Jesus knew that the father had put all things under his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God.

These words are quite something. We've already heard some of them already. John told us already that Jesus knows that he's come from God and is returning to God. But with that John tells us here that Jesus knew that the father had put all things under his power.

Literally Jesus having known that the father had given all things into his hands. That's quite a statement.

[ 8 : 45 ] Think about it. Jesus knew that the father had given all things into his hands. The translation on the screen says all power.

We might see this as a statement about authority. That Jesus knows that he will have dominion over all things. That he will rule and reign and be king over all of it.

all things have been given into his hands. Jesus knew that and so what does Jesus do with this awareness?

This is astounding. having known that the father had given all things into his hands he got up from the meal took off his outer clothing wrapped a towel around his waist poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples feet drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

what an unexpected thing for the one who knows that God has given everything into his hands he takes those very hands and with them he performs the most lowly and humble service that can be done for his friends.

[ 10 : 08 ] He washes the dirt and the dust off their feet. Now the washing of feet is a rather private matter for most of us except for maybe some of you women who like to go and get a pedicure from time to time.

The rest of us we usually like to wash our own feet at home by ourselves in the tub or in the shower but this is a different culture and time a different part of the world being a really hot part of the world they wore sandals all the time.

Having no cars the main way to get around was walking on the dusty and dirty roads and streets. By the time evening rolled around everybody's feet were pretty dirty possibly smelly and so this was a custom to wash their feet before the evening meal.

It was a task normally carried out by the lowest of servants or by slaves and you would almost never wash the feet of one of your peers and if you happened to it would be a mark a sign of great love.

Some Jews even insisted that a Jewish slave should never wash another Jew's feet. It was too demeaning of a task too lowly a task for any Jew to perform.

[ 11 : 34 ] This was truly considered to be one of the lowliest services that you could do for another human being and it was kind of symbolic I mean you think about the person the feet are at the bottom they're the lowest that you can go on the person.

For us today maybe we don't feel quite the same about that but maybe think about the feeling that you might have if you're helping someone who can't do it on their own to take a bath or to change their diaper if they're incontinent or to scrub their toilet for them.

This is maybe a little closer to the feeling that they might have about washing the feet of another person. You don't want to do that unless that's your job, that's your role, that's your service to them. You might be happy to offer that service to someone of great honor like a king but you can bet that the disciples, they had no intention whatsoever of washing each other's feet before this meal.

I'm not sure what happened, whether they just had no servants to do the foot washing or what, we don't know. We might assume that Jesus simply saw or perhaps even smelled the need for it and that he didn't care about positions of authority but that's perhaps what's so shocking here.

[ 13 : 05 ] It wasn't like Jesus just forgot who he was in relation to the disciples. Having known that the father had given all things into his hands, he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing and began to wash his disciples feet.

That's what's amazing about this. Jesus hadn't forgotten that he was the Messiah, that he was to be Lord of all, which means that he did this on purpose, knowing full well what he was doing.

Knowing full well that he was humbling himself to serve them even though they were the ones who really should be serving him, who should be washing his feet. It was a mark of the greatest of loves. The reality, like John the Baptizer had said years earlier, was that these disciples were not even worthy to bend down and untie the sandals of Jesus.

That's how great Jesus the King is, the Son of God is, and yet he loves them so much that he will do this humble and lowly service for them to scrub the dirt of the day off their dusty feet.

[ 14 : 27 ] eventually Jesus comes around to Peter to wash his feet. Verse 6, he came to Simon Peter who said to him, Lord, are you going to wash my feet?

Jesus replied, you do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand. No, said Peter, you shall never wash my feet.

Jesus answered, unless I wash you, you have no part with me. What Peter says doesn't quite come through in the translation on screen here.

Quite literally, Peter says, not ever unto eternity shall you wash my feet. I was trying to think of a modern day English equivalent to that, and I don't recommend this expression, but people in our world might say it this way.

When hell freezes over, will I let you wash my feet? Like, no, uh-uh, not going to happen. And maybe it's implied, I don't know.

[ 15 : 39 ] You give that bowl to me, Jesus, and I'll wash your feet. That's what's right. That's how it should be. And Jesus just slices right through Peter's objection.

He says, unless I wash you, you have no part with me. I think what Jesus means is simply that Peter and all of the disciples must allow Jesus to humbly serve them.

And I don't think it's mainly about the feet. It's that the disciples have need of a humble service that only Jesus can provide for them. And I think this points to what he's about to do for them tomorrow, which is much more humbling and lowly.

His suffering and death on the cross for them. The ultimate act of love. It's as though Jesus is saying, all of you must receive the humble service I offer if you want to be with me, have a part with me.

But it seems that Peter is mainly thinking about the physical, the tangible, the water and washing part of things. Verse 9, Then Lord, Simon Peter replied, not just my feet but my hands and my head

as well.

[17:01] You've got to love Peter. If this washing is needed for me to roll with you, Jesus, then let's go all in. Give me the full bath.

Wash my hands. Wash my head. Whatever this is about. Give me the full package deal. Is this a cleansing rite, a purification ritual of some kind? I don't know what Peter's logic is here.

It seems to be more washing equals bigger share with Jesus. And it's here that I imagine Jesus probably chuckled and said, Oh, Peter, those of you who have had a bath need only to wash their feet.

Their whole body is clean. It's as though Jesus is saying, yes and no. Yes, there is a deeper meaning to what I'm doing right now for you, Peter.

But no, it's not to spiritually cleanse you like a purification rite or a ceremonial washing. That's not the point. On one level, what I'm doing is simply to meet the physical, tangible need.

[18:12] Your feet are dirty, Peter, from the days walking. The rest of you, it looks and smells pretty good from your bath earlier today. No, Peter, this is not about me being made spiritually clean by me washing your feet.

But when it comes to spiritual cleanness, Jesus seems to turn the metaphor that way for a moment here. He seems to be saying that Peter and the other disciples, they already have some measure of cleanness, whether spiritual or ceremonial, I don't know, it doesn't say.

But listen to what he says here in verse 10. Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet. Their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.

You see what I mean? It's like Jesus seems to be saying, speaking of spiritual or perhaps ceremonial cleanness, you all have it, except for one of you, who is defiled, who is unclean.

Verse 11. For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said that not everyone was clean. So whatever kind of cleanness he meant at the end here, Judas didn't have it.

[19:39] And this washing of Judas' feet, it didn't give it to him. He had already been plotting with the Pharisees about how he might hand Jesus over to them. And while the deed hadn't been done yet, the treachery of that deed was being planned and prepared even now in the heart of Judas.

making him unclean. Defiled. There's perhaps a brief word for us here. Sometimes we just are tempted to think that God only really cares about our outward behaviors.

But no. God sees our hearts and our thoughts too. And those inward things defile us and make us unclean too.

it's only through faith in Jesus and his blood shed for us that we can have this spiritual cleanness that Jesus offers.

Finally, we come to the deeper meaning of the foot washing itself. The lesson behind what Jesus did for them that evening. Verse 12. When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place.

[20:55] Do you understand what I have done for you? He asked them. You call me teacher and Lord and rightly so for that is what I am.

Now that I, your Lord and teacher have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.

Very truly, I tell you, no servant is greater than his master nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Here, Jesus gives the lesson to us in all this. The first thing he makes clear is that what he's just done here now, washing their feet, it's not meant to erase all notions of authority or to make all people equal in role with one another.

He says, you call me teacher and Lord and rightly so, you should because that is what I am. It's still fitting for them and it's still fitting for us to refer to Jesus as the teacher and we the learners.

[22:14] To refer to Jesus as the Lord or the master and we the servants. That's the reality between Jesus and his disciples, between Jesus and us. What Jesus does here at this meal, it doesn't change the authority structure.

It doesn't make us somehow the master or greater and him the servant. And just in case there's any confusion about this, Jesus comes back to it.

He reinforces it again in verse 16. He says, very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.

There is still authority, there is still distinction in roles and position. There is still one who is greater and one who is lesser. And Jesus will always be the greater and we the lesser, even though he has stooped down so low to wash our feet, to serve us.

even to die for us. But now the lesson comes in verse 14. Now that I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.

[ 23 : 32 ] I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. what does Jesus mean?

What does he want them to do? Jesus, very simply, wants his disciples to take up the towel and to wash the feet of one another. Now some might here want to talk about foot washing as a ritual that has been practiced in some church traditions.

Should we be doing that? That's a good question if it comes from a sincere desire to understand and to obey the Lord Jesus. I'm just going to share with you the helpful comments of D.A. Carson from his commentary on John.

I found them helpful. This is his answer. Two factors have prevented most Christians from institutionalizing foot washing.

first, nowhere else in the New Testament or in the earliest extra biblical documents of the church is foot washing treated as an ecclesiastical rite, an ordinance, a sacrament.

[ 24 : 40 ] He goes on to acknowledge that there is one place in the New Testament in 1 Timothy 5.10 where foot washing is mentioned but it's merely listed there as a kind of good deed that goes with hospitality in the list of qualifications for widows.

He goes on to say, second and perhaps more importantly, the heart of Jesus' command is a humility and helpfulness toward brothers and sisters in Christ that may be cruelly parodied by a mere rite of foot washing that easily masks an unbroken spirit and a haughty heart.

And I think when most of us hear that, we have to admit, well, yeah, deep down inside we know that Jesus is not here just asking us to regularly do a ritual show of humility and service to one another whenever we gather together.

Just like Jesus washing the feet of the disciples, it had a tangible benefit to them, a need that it met. In the same way, our humble service of one another should meet a need, a real need.

So Jesus is simply commanding them and commanding us to humbly serve one another, to metaphorically take up the towel, do the jobs and work of a servant for one another.

[ 26 : 13 ] Just like with the disciples that night, it's like he's saying, don't look around the room here and think, well, I'm not going to do that for them. That's what the disciples were thinking.

There was the need for someone to wash the feet and it's like they were all just looking around at each other like, well, I'm not going to do that for them. Here today, the need in our church is not foot washing.

But what is the need in our church? Who has a need in our church that you know about? What are the needs in our church for various ministries?

For the adults? For the youth? For the children? Don't look around the room and think, well, I'm not going to do that for them.

Jesus has called all of his disciples to be his servants to one another, to humbly serve one another, to do the jobs and work that nobody wants to do for one another.

[ 27 : 20 ] This is the way that Jesus showed his deep, his great love for his disciples. And this is the way that he's commanded us to love each other. And what will get in the way?

Pride. If you think these kinds of things are beneath you, that's pride. pride. If you think, well, that job or that work or what's needed to help that person or those people over there, that's something I don't like to do.

Well, somebody's got to do it. And if it isn't you, who will do it? The disciples found out that night that Jesus will do it.

There's almost like an argument from the greater to the lesser here. See if you can hear it in verse 14. Now that I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.

It's like he's saying, I am your Lord. I am your teacher. You are my students. You are my servants. And if I, as your Lord and teacher, have humbly served you, how much more should you as peers, as equals, jump up, grab the towel to serve one another?

[ 28 : 39 ] It's like even if some of you were greater than each other and you're not, you should still serve one another like this. I, says Jesus, I am the greater and I have served you.

Take up the towel for one another. Take up the toilet brush for one another. Take up that job that nobody else wants to do for one another. Take up the oven mitts for one another.

Take up the work gloves for one another. And notice that there's no mention here of skill. That's got to be one of the top three excuses I hear to why people can't serve other people in the church.

I'm not very good at that. Or that's not my gift. Now there are a few people when they say that to me when I say, you might be right about that.

You might be right about that. That's okay. We'll find someone else to do it. But most of the time when people say that to me, what I think is, how would you feel if your son or daughter said the same thing to you about taking their turn to wash dishes or clean the bathroom at home?

[ 30 : 00 ] Dad, washing dishes, I'm not very good at that. Mom, cleaning the bathroom, that's not my gift.

I think you're better gifted towards that. I'm pretty sure I know what most of you would say to your son or daughter. And I would suggest to you that with most things in the church, it's no different. There are some people who are specially gifted by God to certain kinds of work in the church. But there are many times and many kinds of service in the church for which a special gifting is not necessary.

Just like with doing the dishes at home or cleaning the bathroom. You can learn how to do it. You can get good at it with practice. I don't want to pick on anyone, but ask Charles before this past year.

I mean, he had very little experience teaching kids Sunday school, right? And over this past year, the more you do something, the better you get at it. You figure out what works and what doesn't work.

[ 31 : 10 ] And now Charles is saying, I love this. This is my thing. I think of myself. I'm not gifted or good at ministering to youth. This past Friday, I had a game planned out for the kids and it bombed.

The kids didn't like it. They said, can we do something else? It was kind of embarrassing. I was a little red. But sometimes by God's plan, he doesn't give us a special gift for the work that needs to be done.

Maybe it's a way that he teaches us to depend on him and to look to him for help. But will we obey the command of Christ and serve like he has given example to us?

Or will we just keep looking around the room at someone else who we deem better suited to the work than us? Take up the towel, says Jesus, just as I have done for you.

As I was reflecting on these words and how they apply to us as a church, I feel that I need to commend some of you. Some of you have been living this way, that Jesus says we should.

[ 32 : 23 ] You've been serving one another. You've been scrubbing the church toilets. You've been vacuuming the church carpets, making coffee on Sunday morning, making and delivering meals to people in need, helping one another out with vehicles or equipment, serving our kids on Sunday mornings with a live, doing the sound booth and the PowerPoint at the back, serving with your voice or instrument for worship, delivering meals on wheels.

The list really can go on. As I thought about it, I thought, wow. For a small church, we are a serving church and we do a lot. And so to all of you who have been helping and serving so faithfully over the years, I just want you to know that your work and your service has not gotten unnoticed.

And the Lord will reward you. He sees it all. And so I just want to say thank you to all of you who have been serving so faithfully over the past years.

Your service is so deeply appreciated by us. Some of you here this morning maybe have been less involved for whatever reason. Maybe it's health.

Maybe you're new. Maybe you're just visiting. Maybe you feel burnt out. Maybe you want to serve, but you're just not sure what to do. Or maybe if you're honest, your attitude has been a little bit like the disciples here.

[ 33 : 51 ] Whatever the reason, this morning if you're here and you hear the Lord's call to take up the towel and you're ready, I want you to know that there's lots of opportunities to serve in this church and in this community.

We've got a bulletin board through that back door. We call it the servant's corner. It's got opportunities printed on it there. And there's lots of opportunities that aren't listed there as well.

Feel free to come and chat with me about it any time. We've got church yard, spring cleaning, youth on Fridays, health center services, other little projects and waiting. And we've also got people who continue to be in need of help, even with just something as simple as a meal, who are having a rough go here in our church.

So if you're looking for ways to serve, check out the servant's corner. Come talk to me and I'd be happy to help you figure out how you can take up the towel. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we're humbled by your love. We know that if we were in the room that night, you would have washed our feet.

[ 35 : 07 ] And we would have known that we should have been the ones with the towel in our hands. We thank you that you have loved us with such an amazing love.

And that you went way further than that. The next day, you suffered and you died for us. We are unworthy. You are worthy.

And we love you so much. Thank you for doing that for us, for meeting the greatest need that we have, that we could not meet for ourselves. We love you and we pray this for your glory.

Amen.