

## The Servant-King

The thirteen men filed into the room as the sun was setting and Passover was beginning. Jesus and His twelve disciples were not from Jerusalem, where they had to go for the Passover. They were from towns far to the north, in the province of Galilee. That meant they had no home of their own in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, no home with wives in their kitchens, no homes with helpers, or even servants, if they were wealthy. No, they needed to borrow or rent a room.

They also needed to do the preparations themselves, no one else was going to cook, prepare the lamb, prepare the unleavened bread, the bitter herbs, the wine, the cups, the tables.

Not only so, but the Sanhedrin was trying to arrest Jesus at Passover, so Jesus needed this place to be secret, not a place He often frequented. Indeed, there was a spy, a traitor within His own group of twelve, so Jesus had to keep the location of this place secret even to most of His disciples. He had to do secret arrangements, lead His disciples there away from the spying eyes of Sanhedrin informers.

The other Gospels tell us of this secret arrangement.

<sup>12</sup> Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they killed the Passover *lamb*, His disciples said to Him, "Where do You want us to go and prepare, that You may eat the Passover?" <sup>13</sup> And He sent out two of His disciples and said to them, "Go into the city, and a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him. <sup>14</sup> Wherever he goes in, say to the master of the house, 'The Teacher says, "Where is the guest room in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?"' <sup>15</sup> Then he will show you a large upper room, furnished *and* prepared; there make ready for us." <sup>16</sup> So His disciples went out, and came into the city, and found it just as He had said to them; and they prepared the Passover. <sup>17</sup> In the evening He came with the twelve. (Mark 14:12–17)

After the two disciples had done the main food arrangements, they went back, and joined Jesus and the other 10. As they walked in, there was no one to greet them, no one to provide the customary kiss of welcome, and no one to wash their dusty feet. Since first-century Jews wore fairly open-toed sandals, and walked very dusty roads, the first act upon entering a home was to have your feet washed. This was both refreshing for your tired feet, and also hygienic, since you were about to recline and eat, leaning on one side, with your legs and feet stretched out away from the table.

But as they filed in, and did not have their feet washed, or their heads anointed, they probably all assumed that this was just what you had to have in a hastily arranged, secret location. There might have been a pitcher or two to wash their hands, but then they would have gone straight to the Tables. The table would have been just a little off the ground, maybe 30 centimetres, and arranged like a square without the bottom, or like an upside-down 'u'. That allowed the ones serving to come in and pour and serve. But here, there were likely no servants.

By this time in Jewish history, the Passover Lambs were killed over two days, as Jews from the north celebrated it a day early, calculating the day from sunup to sunset, as we do. That is why Jesus and His disciples celebrate the Passover on Thursday night, while Jews from Jerusalem are going to celebrate it the next day, since they calculated the day beginning at sunset.

The Passover meal was beautiful and involved a ritual of cups of wine in a kind of service, or *seder*, as it is called. Four cups of wine are drunk at different moments, four questions are asked and answered, different prayers are prayed. Only three food items were prescribed in Scripture: bitter herbs, unleavened bread, and the lamb, which had already been killed at the Temple, and its blood caught and thrown onto the altar.

What happened next is a dramatic tale of how God surprises us, inverts our values, shocks us. It is a lived-out expression of what kind of God our God is, and what kind of lives we must lead in response. And it all happened around this Passover supper.

Our first stop in this story is actually internal. It goes into the very heart and motives of the Lord to tell us why He did what He did. It teaches us about the emotion of the king. That emotion then became an action, which is the example of the king. That action became a teaching, which is the explanation of the king.

## **I. The Emotion of the King**

<sup>1</sup> Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.

Jesus knew that the time had come to depart this world, to finish His ministry. He loved His own disciples “to the uttermost”. This is an amazing phrase which means that Jesus loved His disciples to the fullest possible extent. This full, complete, perfect love was now going to be demonstrated, and that is the tone of everything that happens going forward.

But it was not only love that was in his heart, but also hope.

<sup>2</sup> And supper being ended, the devil having already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s *son*, to betray Him, <sup>3</sup> Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, (John 13:1–3)

John wants us to know that there is one who is out of place here: Judas the betrayer. Jesus is still going to wash Judas’ feet, but Judas is not going to repent and come back from the road he is on. Judas has given control of his heart over to Satan.

But the basis of what Jesus is about to do has to do with His identity and His destination. He knew who He was, and He knew where He was returning. He knew the Father had entrusted Him with all authority, that He was truly God and soon to return there. He could do what He was about to do because He had no point to prove, no glory ladder to climb, no one to compete with. He knew He was the Son of God, and He knew He would soon be returning to His throne.

One of the greatest obstacles to service of others is an inflated sense of self. Our sin natures give us inflated senses of our own importance, of our own dignity, of our own rank. We then set about defending our names and our rights, and our positions. But when you live your life like that, you will be completely self-absorbed, and so full of self, that you can never be filled with the Holy Spirit. Jesus knew exactly who He was, and it did not lead Him to serve less, but to serve more. His identity, His destination, His sovereignty actually freed Him to humble Himself, empty Himself and serve others.

## **II. The Example of the King**

<sup>4</sup> rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. <sup>5</sup> After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe *them* with the towel with which He was girded.

Jesus now proceeds to do what should have been done when they first entered the room. A servant or slave would have done this, or the family member of lowest rank, because this was considered the most menial of tasks. It doesn’t take much imagination to understand why. Jesus has taken off

His outer garments, because He is now going to be kneeling and splattering muddy feet. He has a towel to wipe and dry. So Jesus works through 12 pairs of feet, before His face, toes, cracked heels, toenails. The smell of the dust and grime of Jerusalem, an ancient city where mud mingles with plenty of horse and other animal manure, probably the splatterings of animal blood from all the sacrifices.

One at a time, each disciple stands by the small basin, standing over Jesus, maybe even putting his hand on Jesus' head for balance, as Jesus patiently, kindly, lovingly works through 24 feet.

I imagine all conversation having ceased, a room quiet with guilt, as all twelve know that they regarded foot washing as too lowly a job for any of them to do. They all assumed the absence of a servant meant that the job couldn't be done. But now they see their rabbi, their master, their Lord on His knees, scrubbing at their feet.

They likely don't know what to do. They know this is inverted, backwards, upside down. But they don't know what to say. Except for one of them, who always had something to say.

<sup>6</sup> Then He came to Simon Peter. And *Peter* said to Him, "Lord, are You washing my feet?" <sup>7</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this." <sup>8</sup> Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet!"

Peter vocalises the inappropriateness of the moment: that the one of higher rank is washing the feet of those of lower rank. Really, Lord? You, wash the grime off my feet? Jesus' first answer is to ask Peter to trust Him. Understanding will come later, just submit to it. But Peter refuses. Peter is going to fix what Jesus is doing: you don't serve me, Jesus, I serve you! You will never wash my feet!

Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me."

Jesus explanation is this: if I don't do this for you, then you don't belong to me. If you don't let me serve you, then you'll never be able to serve me in return. But it must begin with you receiving from Me.

Here is a vital principle that distinguishes Christ from religion. God must be the great and primary giver, the one who first serves us, and only then can we serve Him. We must first receive from God, before we can ever make a return to God. In the faith of the Bible, God first serves us in acts of grace, before we can respond. God gives, we receive, and then we respond.

Peter then pendulums to the other side. If this washing symbolises union and submission to Jesus then why stop there?

<sup>9</sup> Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also *my* hands and *my* head!"

<sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, "He who is bathed needs only to wash *his* feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you." <sup>11</sup> For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said, "You are not all clean." (John 13:4–11)

Jesus uses this discussion of cleansing to explain the difference between a true Christian and a false one. A true Christian is like someone who has bathed. The body is clean, but in first-century Jerusalem, your daily walk meant you needed a quick clean of your feet. A Christian has been forgiven of the sins of his whole character and past and present. He is in union with Christ. He doesn't need to get saved again and again. Peter doesn't need a bath to become a Christian. He already is; He is part of Christ.

He just needs a foot-washing. Likewise a true Christian, needs to daily confess his sins, ask God for

the cleansing of the wrong he has done that day. A true Christian lives with frequent confession of the sin he is convicted of for that day.

But Jesus says in verse 10 that not all of the twelve disciples have had that spiritual bath. Not all of the twelve can suffice with just daily confession. One of them is not spiritually clean, he is not forgiven, not saved, not a child of God. He needs the bath, but has never experienced it. Judas, up to this very moment, had never been truly converted, never been cleansed, never been forgiven.

But here is the great summary of the example: this is grace: God humbling Himself to meet needs out of love. God stooping, to do the dirty work, to cleanse.

Having given the example, Jesus is now going to give the explanation.

### **III. The Explanation By The King**

<sup>12</sup> So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?" <sup>13</sup> You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. <sup>14</sup> If I then, *your* Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup> For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. <sup>16</sup> Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him.

Jesus puts away the towel, changes back into His normal clothes, and reclines again with them at the Table. Everyone is quiet. This is a teaching moment.

Jesus now explains by arguing from the greater to the lesser. If something is true at the highest level, then it filters down to the lower levels. Like when Solomon says, if the heavens cannot contain God, how much less can this small Temple contain God?

So here Jesus says to them, you call me Master and Lord, and that is correct, because that is my rank, and that is my relationship to you. But being master and lord, I just stooped down to wash your feet, how much more then, should you, fellow servants of equal rank, be willing to wash each other's feet? If my dignity and superiority did not prevent me from serving you, how much less should your dignity and equality prevent you from serving each other?

Then Jesus pushes the point home. I've given you an example. You disciples are supposed to follow my example. A servant is not greater than his master, a messenger is not greater than the person sending the messenger. A servant is not higher in rank, and therefore exempt from what the master does. He is less than the master, and should do at least what the master does, and even more servantlike activities. So if the master just took the place of the lowest servant in the house, and washed the feet of the disciples, what exactly is beneath a Christian when it comes to another Christian?

Why is Jesus teaching this?

At the heart of the Christian message is humility. The grace of God is God stooping down to meet the needs of the unworthy. That's why verse 2 explained that Jesus knew who He was, knew where He was going, and that's why He could do this. This is who God is. Not some insecure petty deity, not some conceited Greek demigod, not a vain egotistical superhuman demanding attention and protecting his reputation. Here is a God so secure in His glory, so happy in His self-sufficient love, that He can lay aside His prerogatives, lay aside His 'rights', lay aside His 'claims' and come and die for a race lost in their own sin.

This is what Paul describes when He says

<sup>5</sup> Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, <sup>7</sup> but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, *and* coming in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to *the point of* death, even the death of the cross. (Philippians 2:5–8)

Jesus is teaching His disciples that this is the beginning of Christianity. This is the start, the entrance, the launchpad. This is Christianity 101: God's grace, God stoops, God gives, God serves us. And only if we receive His service of us, are we part of Him. If we are too proud to be served, too self-sufficient to have God wash our feet, we cannot be a part of Him. If we want a God who is more dignified than this, a God who does not stoop, a God who does not become human, a God who does not get dirty in the streets of Jerusalem, wash grimy feet, and above all, a God who will not have flies and insects land on his blood-streaked face, a God who not will be stretched out and exposed on an instrument of torture, the cross, if that is too undignified for our dignity, then can have no part of Him.

But if we, knowing all the incongruity and inappropriateness and topsy-turviness of it, if we will let God the Son be at our feet, serving us, we can have forgiveness, a true bath, a washing away of our sin.

When that is truly in us, we will then look around at the Body of Christ, and say, now what need here is beneath me to meet? What is there to do in the church of God that is too low for me, too undignified, too demeaning for me? When you have been served by God, what service can you refuse of others?

Now what did Jesus mean by this? Did He want the disciples to make sure they washed each other's feet? Did He mean, as some Christians have mistakenly understood, that He was instituting a ceremony of foot-washing that is to be practised in the church? No. The idea was never to limit this to one specific act that was very bound to the time and place and customs and manners of Israel. Jesus meant the idea of meeting needs, however unpleasant, at the cost of your own pride and dignity. That goes way beyond feet.

But the last verse of this section tells us that we do not run at a loss when we become servants. <sup>17</sup> If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. (John 13:12–17)

Blessed means happy, joyful, full of gladness and spiritual health. If you do more than know the ideas of grace, humility and servanthood, but you actually receive them and then flesh them out to others, you will experience inner blessing. You will be the recipient of the promise of Proverbs <sup>25</sup> The generous soul will be made rich, And he who waters will also be watered himself. (Proverbs 11:25)

So, the very first section of this Upper Room Discourse asks us two questions: first, have you been served by the Lord Jesus? Have you received His foot-washing? Not literally, but the washing of your life's sins by His work on the cross, where He disrobed Himself of glory, stooped down to a cross to scrub the muck and mire off our unattractive sinful selves? You have no part of Him if you do not firstly receive.

The second question is, are you serving like the Lord Jesus in a dying world? In the church and in the world, does His example of love and humility move you to forsake your own comfort and supposed dignity to meet the spiritual, emotional and physical needs of others? If you know it, blessed are you if you do it.

