

John 13:1-17 Modelling Christ-like love

Introduction

The teaching of Jesus at the Last Supper is very precious and valuable and many Christians have gained significant insights into how they ought to live their lives through this instruction from our Lord and Saviour. Yet what Jesus did for His followers at the start of the evening has been especially powerful in Christian memory. In a small number of Christian groups foot-washing has been incorporated into their worship services, but that was not what Jesus was seeking to communicate by His example that evening. For the people gathered that evening in the Upper Room in Jerusalem there was a need for someone to undertake that task, but no-one wanted to do it. Today there is not a pressing need for foot-washing in public gatherings in Scotland. But what was it that Jesus was teaching here? It was that the person who seeks to model Christ-like love will be on the lookout where they can take responsibility for carrying out particular tasks that need to be done. It will be very different things in particular contexts at the present time. At my first Christian Union house-party (weekend away) in the Lake District in England, as an undergraduate student, I vaguely remember being in on a working group that was overseeing the practical jobs that had to be done before we left the venue hired for the weekend. In the conversation a list had been drawn up of the remaining duties, but someone remarked that no-one would want to clean the toilets! It is possible that this had been an issue on a previous occasion, but when the meeting had concluded we quickly discovered that while we were talking the Christian pastor who had been the guest speaker had been doing the very job no-one wanted to do. He would never have been asked to do it, but without any prompting behind the scenes he had seen the need and quietly taken care of it. I and probably many others present that weekend will be unable to recall a word that man said of what were good messages, but the example of Christian service he offered has remained fixed in my mind to this day. To a group of potential future Christian leaders a model of Christ-like love was demonstrated in our midst.

As I was preparing this message I stopped to reflect on different Christian men and women who in simple ways had shown this kind of humility and graciousness in congregations I had attended over the years. I thank God for each one of them. All the examples that came to mind were different, but without exception the servant heart of the individuals concerned was clear. Take a few moments later today to do the same. It will be a real blessing to you as you thank the Lord for the individuals who come to mind, some of whom will undoubtedly now be with the Lord. When we come to look forward to a new church year there will in this congregation and in other contexts be opportunities for all of us to model Christ-like love to different people in a multitude of different ways. I have certainly been encouraged over the years in this church observing many examples of this kind of ministry by different people in the church. Our words to others are important and have their place, but our actions which may be to us so small and insignificant will have a greater impact on the people we meet day by day. May God grant us wisdom and insight as we seek to build relationships with God's love in the coming year. What do we see here in John 13?

1. A powerful example (John 13:1)

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.

(a) **The immediate context** (Luke 22:24-27) At the Last Supper when the disciples should have been focussed on what Jesus was saying and have noticed the strain He was under as the cross drew ever closer, but it appears that they failed to appreciate it. Instead, Luke 22:24-27 reveals the issue that was pressing on their minds –a topic that could as easily have been found in a primary school playground –and these were a bunch of grown men! *Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest.* ²⁵ *Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors.* ²⁶ *But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.* ²⁷ *For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.* Their argument was about their respective places in the hierarchy of Jesus' followers. This was as suitable a topic of conversation as a group of family members discussing what they hoped to gain out of the will of the person whose funeral service they were attending that day. Who is the greatest? Who is most important? Was this the first time this issue had come up? Unfortunately it had been a recurring problem. Luke 9:46-48 reveals details of an earlier incident some weeks or possibly a few months earlier: ⁴⁶ *An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest.* ⁴⁷ *Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside Him.* ⁴⁸ *Then He said to them, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes Me; and whoever welcomes Me welcomes the one who sent Me. For he who is least among you all—he is the greatest."* Was this just a problem in the first century followers of Jesus? Or does it occur today? Are we as likely to find such inappropriate attitudes in Christian Churches –within our own hearts as happened all those years ago? When people are chosen for a particular committee or post-holder –how do you and I react when someone else is chosen ahead of us? What about when we have carried out some task or ministry that may not have been acknowledged publicly as we might have wished –how do we react in our hearts? Do we want to throw our metaphorical 'toys across the room' and decline to play the game in future as a little child might do who hasn't got their own way? Or have we attained a greater level of Christian maturity and become willing to have the heart of a servant who is available to offer their gifts but who is also pleased when other people are given a chance to use theirs? Or if we are the person making the choices do we look to see if there are people who might have gifts to use that could have been overlooked before –rather than automatically always using the same people? Christian love, agape love, is not sentimental or emotional but deeply practical and down to earth. It is counter-cultural and provides a provocative challenge to the values of secular society around us. I suspect that today, just as much as 2,000 years ago with Jesus' disciples, the influence of the world's values have infected the people of God who need to work hard to exercise a Christ-like mind in the way we relate to one another – if we are no different to any secular club or community group in our values and standards then why do we exist? It is simply to believe the teaching that Jesus taught us and to practice the lifestyle which He modelled for us! Only through the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit can we be enabled to live our lives in this way! However, like the car driving test many of us require several attempts to get it right. We all have human frailties and weaknesses and fail and need to apologise to one another and receive apologies in return for the shortcomings of others. It was in this context of the incident that takes place in John 13 that Jesus gives the one test by which people outside the church family can assess the credibility of our claim to be Christians. In John 13:34-35 we read: *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.* ³⁵ *By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* What does this mean in practice? On a Sunday it means welcoming visitors –not just the people assigned to that duty on the door, but each of us accepting that responsibility and not assuming that we can talk exclusively to our friends and family and that someone else will make a point of

welcoming new friends to the congregation. In the week it may mean a card or a phone call or a visit to those who are unwell or infirm –or an offer to assist with shopping or cleaning or a lift to hospital or whatever the need may be- if we are aware someone is struggling to accomplish these tasks. If there are people whose attendance has gone down significantly not to leave it to the minister or a member of the pastoral team to get in touch, but if you have noticed, make that contact to let the person know that you care enough to be in touch with them and want to encourage them to come back to the church in the near future. Christian love is so much more than saying the right words it is living the right way - Jesus' way;

(b) **The eternal context** (John 13:1) *It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for Him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved His own who were in the world, He now showed them the full extent of His love. God's timing is perfect –even if we on earth are unable to see how particular events could possibly fit into such a framework. God is in control of His world, despite, sometimes, the inhumanity shown by some sectors of humanity to others on grounds of race or religion or imperial power or economic greed. Jesus was secure in His Father's love for Him and on that basis modelled love for His disciples in a profound and challenging way. He did not worry about tomorrow or the future –as we often do. What He had earlier told the disciples -But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own (Matthew 6:33-34) – He was demonstrating in the choices He made in daily life. The love that brought Him down from heaven in the first place would keep Him focussed on the pathway to the cross in the place of sinners. In Graham Kendrick's modern hymn 'Such love' (C.M.P.619) there is the verse 'Such love springs from eternity; such love, streaming through history; such love, fountain of life to me; O Jesus, such love.' It takes a person secure in God's love for them to treat other people in this way, especially on those occasions when it is not reciprocated.*

2. **An indefensible attitude** (John 13:2, 27-30)

This was a special religious occasion. Such occasions were attended by people of faith. What happened in that Upper Room was a sacred event repeated annually -if it was a Passover meal unbelievers were specifically excluded (Exodus 12:43-49). We naturally focus on the actions of Jesus which were very moving and symbolic and speak powerfully of God's love for us. In such a context we read these words in verse two and from verses twenty-seven to thirty: *The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus (John 13:2). ²⁷As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. "What you are about to do, do quickly," Jesus told him, ²⁸but no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. ²⁹Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the Feast, or to give something to the poor. ³⁰As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night (John 13:27-30).* What a shocking contrast! The Lord of glory facing the most difficult twenty-four hours of His life on earth and He cannot count on even the twelve men in whom he had invested so much time and effort in the previous three years. How could a person in such a context behave like this? Instead of wanting God's will to be done- Judas had his own agenda, his own issues, which he saw as more important than the priorities of Jesus. Out of that group of people eight of the other eleven would not be trusted to attend the prayer meeting with Jesus after this meal and service had been concluded; of the three who did go with Him, Peter, James and John, Jesus twice had to wake them up when they slept rather than prayed and to cap it all later that same night Peter would deny three times that he had ever been with Jesus, let alone a committed disciple (Mark 14:66-72), just hours after vehemently denying he would ever do any such thing (John 13:37-38). Would you be willing to invite such a group of unreliable failures to dinner? Would you think of starting

the Christian Church with such unpromising material? Judas sadly would not repent of his evil ways and ended up taking his own life- he could not accept the way of the cross. Yet Jesus would transform by the power of His Spirit these other inadequate people. What kind of people do we find in churches each Sunday or belonging to any particular congregation? Are they always devoted followers of Jesus, eager to attend worship services week by week; incredibly generous with their financial giving and dedicated in the use of their time in the work of the church at home and overseas; people who are good neighbours and always welcoming to new people who may come along to visit their local congregation? Or is this only part of the picture –are we just as frail and weak as the people with whom Jesus shared this Passover meal? Within the human heart there is the potential for incredible good but equally the potential for incredible darkness and evil. These verses remind us not to point the finger at others, but to look within our own hearts and to ask God to remove anything that hinders us being the man or women that He wants us to be. In the world there is no more powerful body of people than the Church of Jesus Christ living wholeheartedly for Him, but equally sometimes the opposite can be true when our agendas or outright sinful words and actions undermine the witness we should be giving to the world.

3. An unshakable confidence (John13:3)

Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under His power, and that He had come from God and was returning to God (John 13:3);

As the Son of God Jesus knew exactly what Judas had been thinking and had gone out to accomplish. Yet this was not the final word. His life and ours is in God's hands. This does not spare us the agonies of suffering in the variety of life situations we may experience –but even in our hours of darkness the Lord is there standing with us. In this context Jesus knew that the parameters of His ministry and indeed His whole life on earth took place within the boundaries of the love of His heavenly Father. Nothing could take place outside the foreordained plan of the Father –which included His death on a cross. In Acts 2:23 Peter declared to the large crowd of Jewish believers on the Day of Pentecost: *This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross.* Divine sovereignty over the life, death and resurrection of Jesus –yet equally true human responsibility for the actions which put Him there; there is never any excuse for sinful words or actions. We cannot claim God predestined it -so I cannot help myself! This is a paradox with which we must live –but in those bleak moments such as the Holocaust in the 1940s or other times of unspeakable evil such as the 1915 genocide of Armenians in Turkey or the similar acts of depravity more recently in Rwanda, and sadly in other places since as well, God's people look for His redemptive purpose in spite of the wicked acts of men. At the end of the day it was not Herod or Pilate, Caiaphas or the Sanhedrin but the redemptive and overwhelming love of God for His people that took Jesus to the cross. In the midst of whatever you may be experiencing just now –may God help you to gain or retain an unshakable confidence in the plans and purposes of your heavenly Father.

4. The Inescapable Challenge (John13:4-17)

(a)**The Actions of Jesus** (John 13:4-7) *so He got up from the meal, took off His outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around His waist. ⁵After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash His disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around Him.⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to Him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."* Has this ever happened at a dinner party in your home? Of course not -but neither had they experienced it from a host or fellow guest.

We read stories in the Bible and tend to assume that what happened then was normal practice unless it is stated otherwise. Foot-washing, if it happened, took place in the homes of wealthy people and was carried out by Gentile slaves. Jewish servants were not allowed to do such a task as it was deemed too humiliating for a fellow Israelite –whatever their social circumstances. Remember the context of this action- the disciples had been arguing about who was the greatest? In this specific context Jesus models leadership and greatness. A major UK company had suffered industrial relations issues in a number of its branches around the country. A new manager came in and within twelve months all the workforce was on board cheerfully carrying out tasks that had been a cause of conflict. They had not been paid a penny more or gained extra holidays or any other material benefits. What had made the difference? The new manager had gone to each area of the country and spoken to every employee, treating them as equals as persons and inviting them to work with him in accomplishing the company's goals. The previous senior manager had issued edicts and met only with regional bosses. One of the two men was a professing Christian and had taken his Christian principles with him to the office and not kept them squeaky-clean to bring out only on Sundays. The relevance of our faith has never been greater than at the present time; people are looking for a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives –but most are not looking in churches because they, like Ghandi in South Africa and India, sadly, admire Jesus greatly but fear that the churches are not taking Him seriously. If the Christians in the churches don't truly live in a Christ-like way, then we cannot expect other people to want to come and join us. Are you and I up for the challenge? I believe that the reward of obedient Christ-like discipleship will result in people coming to faith, but they need to see us 'walking the walk' before they will seriously listen to us 'talking the talk' of faith. (b) **The Explanation of Jesus** (John 13:8-17) ⁸"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." ⁹"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" ¹⁰Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." ¹¹For He knew who was going to betray Him, and that was why He said not every one was clean. ¹²When He had finished washing their feet, He put on his clothes and returned to His place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" He asked them. ¹³"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷**Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.** Is foot-washing a necessary sacrament for salvation? No! It is not even to be expected on Easter Thursday! What it demonstrates is a willingness of God's people to take living for God as seriously as Jesus did. It may be serving refreshments after a service or doing the church cleaning; it may mean visiting that difficult person whom nobody else wants to spend time with –but yet who is desperately lonely and in need of company. It may mean helping with charities in Dundee such as Eagles Wings (work with the homeless) or Rock Street Chaplains (Christian ministry to Nigh-club staff and guests) or one of many other charitable causes. It might mean missionary service overseas or a call to some form of full-time Christian ministry at home. Or simply giving someone a few minutes of your time this week! The question is this: am I / are you willing to be the person Jesus wants us to be and to do the tasks that He wants us to do? Peter had to learn that following Jesus was on His terms not ours. Peter had struggled with this issue on a number of occasions. In Matthew 16 when he first acknowledged the deity of Christ he could not get his head round the nature of Jesus' forthcoming death. Jesus addressed this question in blunt terms and used it to give a clear challenge to all His would-be disciples then and now: Matthew 16:21-26 states: ²¹From that time on Jesus began to explain to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the

law, and that He must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.²² Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to You!"²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."²⁴ Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. ²⁵For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me will find it. ²⁶What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? Sometimes our pride gets in the way, especially for us men, who may want to be seen as in charge or in control and being humble and fulfilling a servant role is one with which we sometimes struggle. Jesus in this practical demonstration of love reminds us all so clearly what it is all about and asks us to come and follow Him. His words here at the end of this section in John 13:17 are especially clear. *Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.* Will you come with me and with others here today on the pathway of Christian discipleship, by the power of His Holy Spirit to seek to live in this way building relationships through modelling Christ-like love? I hope and pray that that will be the experience of each one of us, for Jesus' sake, Amen.

Week 4 John 13:1-17 Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- Q1. What example comes to your mind of a fellow Christian modelling this kind of love for other people? Explain why you chose this particular example.
- Q2. What was the context of this action of Jesus -see Luke 22:24-27? Was this the first time the disciples had this problem see Luke 9:46-48? What can we learn from this?
- Q3. Jesus gave one test to outsiders to judge our credibility (John 13:34-35) Why this one?
- Q4. What attitudes were shown by the disciples of Jesus that night?
Why do you think they had failed to grasp what Jesus sought to teach them?
- Q5. Why was Jesus enabled to keep going in His mission (John 13:3- see also Acts 2:23)?
What can we learn from this as we look at trouble today in places like Syria and Iraq?
- Q6. *Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them* (John 13:17); what kind of things might Jesus be asking us to do at the present time and in the future?