

“Love in Action”

August 23, 2026

John 13:1-17

I. Introduction:

As Chapter 13 opens, Jesus’ public ministry to Israel has come to an end—as John wrote in [John 12:36](#), **“When he had finished speaking, Jesus left and hid himself from them.”** In Chapters 13 through 17 of the Gospel of John, Jesus turned from those who rejected Him and turned to those who were going to carry on after He was gone. Basically, chapters 13-17 are John’s record of Jesus’ farewell message to His disciples. In particular, chapter 17 is Jesus’ familiar intercessory prayer for them and for those that follow—including those that are Christians today. The common theme that runs throughout these 5 chapters is Jesus’ love for His own.

As His earthly ministry drew to a close on the night before His crucifixion, Jesus emphasized the importance of love; the love He had for His disciples and the love they should have for one another. There is an old saying: *“Actions speak louder than words.”* This was true for Jesus’ disciples then and now. Jesus had taught and demonstrated loving God and loving others for 3 years. The disciples knew the words, but the appropriate actions were missing. Luke wrote in [Luke 22:24](#) that while the disciples were sitting at the table **“a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be the greatest.”** They were still anticipating that Jesus was going to establish His Messianic kingdom and each man wanted his rightful position.

So, Jesus needed to show them one more time love in action. Jesus’ demonstration and object lesson was so shocking that they would never again forget putting their love into action. Perhaps remembering this event, Peter wrote in [1 Peter 5:5](#), **“be clothed with humility.”** In today’s Scripture, we see Jesus demonstrate His love and humility; Peter’s response and, finally, Jesus’ application of His actions—His lesson—to all disciples.

II. Jesus' Demonstration

Jesus had entered Jerusalem on Sunday—Palm Sunday, and on Monday He had cleansed the Temple. Tuesday was a day of conflict with the religious leaders as they tried to find evidence to have Jesus arrested. [Chapters 21-25 of the Gospel of Matthew](#) record those events. Wednesday was a quiet day—I suspect that, knowing what was ahead, Jesus may have spent a lot of time in prayer with the Father. On Thursday Jesus met with His disciples in the Upper Room to observe Passover.

The Passover Feast was the annual Jewish festival commemorating God's deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt. The name comes from the angel of death's passing over the houses of the Hebrews when he killed the firstborn of the Egyptians ([Exodus 12:7, 12-13](#)). The Passover Jesus celebrated with the disciples would be the last divinely sanctioned Passover. From this point on there would be a new memorial—not recalling the lamb's blood on the doorposts, but the blood of the Lamb of God which, as [Matthew 26:28](#) says, was **“poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”**

The disciples didn't know it, but the reason for Jesus' coming to earth had finally arrived—as John wrote in [verse 1](#), **“Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father.”** Jesus knew why He came. From the human point of view, it meant pain and suffering; from the divine point of view, it meant glory and honor. Jesus would soon be arrested and sentenced to death on a cross. Then, after being nailed to the cross; He would die. But three days later He would rise from the dead and soon after that He would be glorified as He ascended to the Father in heaven.

Jesus was in full control of everything that was happening. He wasn't a victim of circumstances or even men's evil schemes. Jesus wasn't surprised by anything that happened, He was in control. Jesus even knew that Judas would betray Him. Judas' greed and ambition had opened the door to the devil's influence. As they gathered around the table, Judas' unsaved heart and selfish pride wanted the same thing Satan wanted—Jesus' death. In the Sermon on the Mount, in [Matt. 5:44](#), Jesus had said, **“Love your enemies.”** Now He did just that. By humbly washing Judas' feet, Jesus met Judas' coming betrayal and hatred with humble, sacrificial love. This demonstration of Jesus' love may have been the last straw for Judas.

Verses 3 & 4 of John 13 say: “Jesus knew that the Father had given Him authority over everything and that He had come from God and would return to God. SO, *i.e., because He was secure in who He was, He got up from the table.*” What Jesus knew helped determine what He did. The disciples must have been shocked when they saw their Master get up from supper and begin to wash their feet. Even Jewish servants did not wash their masters’ feet; that was left for Gentile slaves to do. It was a degrading, lowly task for the lowest of servants, and yet Jesus, their Teacher and Master, did it! Jesus served His disciples because of His humility and because of His love for them.

Walking through the streets of Jerusalem—or any other city at that time—meant one was walking not just through dirt but also through the garbage that was thrown into the streets and through the donkey and camel and horse manure that covered the streets. So, when the disciples reclined at the table for the Passover meal, a rather long meal, their feet stunk. Since there were no servants to wash their feet, someone should have volunteered to do it. But instead of humbling themselves, they argued about their importance: “*Who was number 1?! What position was each going to have in Jesus’ coming kingdom?*” The last thing any one of them would do was this task of washing dirty, smelly feet. Jesus’ words from Matthew 23:11 were forgotten, “**The greatest among you will be your servant.**”

How embarrassed and ashamed they must have felt when “**He got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.**” I suspect that there were several red faces and that it got so quiet that you could have heard a pin drop—that is until Jesus got to Peter.

III. Peter’s Outburst

Peter often spoke impulsively as he spoke for himself and, I suspect, for many of the disciples. And, just as often, he was corrected by Jesus, but this didn’t seem to stop him the next time. Like many of us, Peter was a slow learner. As he watched Jesus go from disciple to disciple, Peter must have become more and more upset until when Jesus finally got to him, he said, “**You shall never wash my feet.**” But Jesus

was doing more than cleaning up dirty, smelly feet; He was trying to teach His disciples the importance of walking in humility and love.

When a sinner trusts the Savior, he is bathed all over and his sins are washed away and forgiven.

Turn to [Titus 3:3-7](#). In [Colossians 2:13](#) Paul wrote, **“When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins.”**

Or as [Romans 5:8](#) says, **“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”** Everyone who makes Jesus his Lord and Savior is justified before God—our sins are forgiven.

But as a believer, as a Christian goes about his daily activities, he becomes dirty. He sins. He becomes defiled. Jesus told Peter (and us) that we don’t have to be bathed or washed all over again and again and again—to use a church term: we are saved; we are disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. We just need to have the sin or defilement cleansed away. As [1 John 1:9](#) says, **“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and will purify us from all unrighteousness.”** To be cleansed—purified—from daily sins, Christians need to confess their sins. Confession means to agree with God that we have violated God’s commands. As well as admitting that we have done wrong, confession also means that we must purpose in our hearts, with the help of the Holy Spirit, not to continue doing them.

Before Jesus and His disciples could recline around the table and have communion with one another, every disciple needed to have clean, unsmelly feet. In the spiritual sense, if we are going to have communion with Jesus Christ, we must be clean spiritually. In [Psalm 66:18](#) David wrote, **“If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.”** [Isaiah 59:2](#) puts it this way: **But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.”** If we permit unconfessed sin in our lives, we hinder our walk with that Lord. Unconfessed sin comes between God and His children. That’s why we need our spiritual feet washed. That’s what is meant in [Lev. 11:44](#) when God said, **“I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy.”**

Jesus was careful to point out that Peter and Judas were in different relationships with God. **“You are clean, though not every one of you.”** Jesus washed Judas’ feet, but it did Judas no good spiritually, unlike Peter he hadn’t been bathed all over. Judas had never believed that Jesus was the Messiah. He had never been cleansed of his sins. He was still an unbeliever—he had never been bathed all over. **Turn to John 6:63-71.**

IV. Jesus’ Lesson

Having washed the disciples’ feet, Jesus put on His clothes and returned to His place. **“Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them.** Since they didn’t get it (they wouldn’t until the coming of the Holy Spirit), He taught them what He had just tried to show them. Although the teaching about daily cleansing of sin versus once-for-all justification was important, Jesus’ major lesson was the importance of humble, loving service. Jesus had demonstrated humility and agape love in action through washing the disciples’ feet. Actions show the inner attitude one has.

As their master, Jesus could have commanded them to do what He had just done. Instead, He gave them an example of true Christian ministry filled with humility and love. During the 3 years He had been with the disciples, Jesus had taught them about humility and love; now He had showed them one more time what true humility and true love looked like. Actions do speak louder than words, but it’s more than that. **James 2:26** says, **“As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”** This was the crucial lesson for the disciples: *“If the Lord of Glory was willing to humble himself and take on the role of the lowest slave, how could His disciples do less?”*

Since **“no servant is greater than his master,”** if the master becomes a slave, where does that put the servant? *On the same level as the master—a slave!* Jesus dignified sacrifice and service in a culture that looked down on both. To refuse to follow Jesus’ example of humble service is to pridefully elevate oneself above Him.

Jesus concluded His lesson with this thought, **“Now that you know these things, you will be blessed to do them.”** It’s not enough to know the truth; it must be put into practice. **Turn to**

James 1:22-25. Blessing—deep down contentment—comes in doing the Word, not just in hearing it.

V. Challenge

Jesus was the Sovereign God, yet He took the place of a servant. **Colossians 1:15-16** describe Jesus this way: **“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible; whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.”** Jesus was the Creator, Lord and Master of the universe, yet He humbly served His disciples. Someone has said that *humility is not thinking lowly of yourself; it is simply not thinking of yourself at all*. If on the night in which He was going to lovingly suffer and die on a cross for others, Jesus could humble Himself and lovingly serve all His disciples, including Judas, do we have any excuse not to humble ourselves, to think about others and serve them to the best of our ability?

The world thinks that happiness is the result of others serving us, but real joy comes when we, like Jesus, humble ourselves and serve others in the name of Christ. Jesus said, **“You will be blessed—happy—if you do them.”** Jesus showed that it takes humility and grace and agape love to serve others. And on the receiving side, Peter showed that it also takes humility and grace and agape love to allow others to serve us. The great thing about a submissive spirit is that it can both give and receive all to the glory of God.

If you want to be blessed—to be content deep-down-in-your-heart, don’t just nod your intellectual mind and know this truth, do what Jesus taught and showed you to do. As John wrote in **1 John 2:6**, **“Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.”** Paul wrote in **Philippians 2:5**, **“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.”** Peter wrote in **1 Peter 2:21**, **“To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.”**

This then is the challenge from these verses: humble yourself (submit to the Father), keep your life clean (daily confess your sins) and lovingly serve others. This is God’s formula for true spiritual joy. Remember the letters WWJD—what would Jesus do? This is WHAT Jesus did! We need to do the same, we need to put love into action.