AS I HAVE LOVED YOU, SO YOU MUST LOVE ONE ANOTHER

John 13:1–38

Key Verse: 13:34

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”

According to verse 1, it was just before the Passover lamb was sacrificed. Most Jews were excited to celebrate their biggest holiday, but they weren’t aware of what was going on. Jesus himself was about to fulfill the Passover. He would become the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (1:29). Throughout his ministry he’d often said, “My time/hour has not yet come.” But now he knew that at last, his time *had* come. It wasn’t time for him to receive human glory on earth; it was time for him to leave this world and go back to the Father.

It was a difficult time for Jesus. In the previous chapter he testified that his soul was troubled (12:27). Often when we’re upset, all we can think about is ourselves. But verse 1 describes Jesus, “Having loved his own who were in the world…” Jesus wasn’t thinking about himself; he was thinking about “his own.” Who were they? Were they his pet favorites, his relatives, those within his territorial domain? No, they were his disciples. They weren’t just hanging around him physically; they had actually accepted God’s words. Jesus once told the arrogant Jews, “… you have no room for my word… you are unable to hear what I say… Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God” (8:37,43,47). But the disciples kept following when others left, because Jesus had the words of eternal life (6:68). This shows that they belonged to God. Because they were humble enough to learn from Jesus and receive his words, their inner persons became clean (15:3). Jesus gave them the words the Father had given him, and they accepted his words (17:8). Because they accepted the word of God, they were “his own.” These were the people on whom Jesus focused his thoughts and all his ministry.

The last part of verse 1 says, “…he loved them to the end.” Jesus had originally initiated the relationship. He’d loved them first, when they didn’t know or love him. He’d kept on loving them, when they didn’t understand and when their way of thinking hadn’t changed. Now, at the very end of his time with them, they’re thinking only about themselves, and he’s still loving them. It’s beyond what a human can do. Human love is fickle, partial and conditional. Jesus’ love is unchanging, unconditional, and faithful. It’s another evidence that Jesus is God.

The setting of Jesus showing his love for them is also notable. Look at verse 2. They were about to eat the Passover meal together, but someone among them had already chosen to betray Jesus, prompted by the devil. Jesus knew all about this. Humanly, it must have been hard for him even to be in that room. It looked like the devil was about to ruin everything Jesus had invested his whole life in. But Jesus saw things differently. Look at verse 3. He was aware of God’s presence even in the midst of evil, human falsity and betrayal. He had confidence in God’s sovereign rule and final victory. He may have looked helpless, but actually everything was under his power. But what did he do with that power? Look at verses 4–5. Instead of screaming at Judas for his treachery, rebuking the rest of them for their self-absorption, or declaring all-out war on the devil, he humbled himself and began to wash his disciples’ feet like the lowest servant. He was showing them that God uses his power to love. He was also showing them that love is humble. It isn’t just a feeling; love is to serve. Many people think menial tasks are beneath them. But Jesus, the Son of God, willingly made himself like the lowest slave and servant of all. He was the one doing what nobody else would to lower himself to do. Ultimately, he was washing their feet to illustrate the meaning of his death just a few hours away. In his death on a cross he would give himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness, purify us from our sins and make us holy through his own blood (Tit2:14; Heb13:12).

Look at verses 6–8a. Simon Peter didn’t like what Jesus was doing. He probably thought *he* should be washing *Jesus’* feet. He couldn’t accept that Jesus had reversed the roles and had come to wash *his* feet. Though Jesus said he would understand later, Peter said, “No, you shall never wash my feet.” His feelings and own idea were too strong. On the surface, he respected Jesus too much to let him do this, but underneath, the real issue was his pride. He didn’t want Jesus to touch his dirty, smelly feet. It wasn’t just Peter’s problem. Most of us are too proud to expose our sins. We address them only if we’re caught or forced. We’d rather deal with them by ourselves rather than ask anybody’s help, even Jesus’. Look at the last part of verse 8. Jesus was giving Peter and us an ultimatum. Each of us needs to open up and bring our sins, no matter how dirty or smelly, to Jesus, and let him wash us. This is actually how we have a real relationship with him. 1 John 1:8–9 says, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

Jesus’ conversation with Peter has another meaning for us as well. Look at verses 9–10. Again Peter revealed his passionate character. To have a part with Jesus, now he was willing to let him wash him all over. But Jesus said, “Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean.” This, too, describes Christian life. When we first come to Jesus, confessing and repenting of our sins, it’s like his giving us a bath. We become clean. But as we live in this world, over time it’s inevitable that our feet will get dirty, meaning we’ll sin. Though embarrassing, we need to bring our dirty feet to Jesus again and accept his washing. To do this, we need to get over our pride. He actually *wants* us to come to him and bring our sins to him. As we do, we freshly experience his great love. This is how we live in a real, ongoing relationship with him. But Jesus didn’t put much credence in a merely outward foot washing. Look at verses 10b–11. Jesus had washed the feet even of Judas Iscariot. But Judas didn’t really accept it. It tells us that Christian rituals alone, without faith, aren’t effective. It also tells us that Jesus was really burdened with Judas’ betrayal, and he needed to deal with it. But first, he wanted to teach another important lesson.

Read verses 12–15. Just as Jesus washing our feet has a spiritual meaning, so does washing one another’s feet. First of all, we should notice that Jesus is addressing mainly the relationships between his faithful followers. Jesus wants us to humble ourselves before each other, honor each other ahead of ourselves, be devoted to each other and serve each other (Ro12:10). We need to do this not just for our friends, people we like to hang out with, or those we’re trying to help, but for our fellow Christians, people who’re often very difficult and different from us. Colossians 3:12–14 says, “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” Ultimately, washing one another’s feet means way more than mere menial acts of service; it means being willing to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters, as Jesus laid down his life for us (1Jn3:16). In light of Jesus’ teaching and example, we all probably have some things we need to repent of today. In reality, to go and wash one another’s feet may seem just too hard. Actually, we don’t have the strength within ourselves to do it. But we should remember that Jesus first washed his disciples feet; then he told them to wash one another’s feet. It tells us that we first need to experience Jesus’ forgiving love; then we can truly have *his* grace and *his* love to humbly serve and forgive one another.

Jesus knew his disciples’ and our human nature well. He knew they would have a strong aversion to doing this. So he kind of pushed them. Read verse 16. He meant, “If I humbled myself in this way and washed my brothers’ feet, then you need to do it, too.” Then he added a final word of encouragement. Read verse 17. Here, “blessed” means happy. To humbly serve one another with Jesus’ love and forgiveness is hard, but it makes us truly happy, blessed people.

But the story doesn’t stop there. Look at verses 18–21. It was very painful to bring up, but Jesus had to tell them frankly that one of them would betray him. It was another expression of his love, to help them believe in him (19). It was also a way for him to show them another important aspect of his love. In this chapter we’ve learned about Jesus’ love. His love takes the initiative. His love is faithful to the end. His love is to humbly serve and to forgive. Here, his love is shown even to the worst enemy, the one who’d decided to betray him. It’s not a small part; it’s 13 verses at the very heart of the story. Like Jesus, though it’s so hard to do, we need to learn to love people like Judas Iscariot to the end.

Look at verses 23–26. The one whom Jesus loved seems to be the author John. He was reclining right next to Jesus. When he heard that one of the Twelve would betray Jesus, Simon Peter really wanted to know which one it was. Maybe he thought he would try to take him out. John was so close to Jesus that in Greek it literally says he lied down on Jesus’ breast to ask him. Jesus was willing to show these two who it was. His signal was giving a piece of his own bread. In their culture, it was more than just sharing fries; it symbolized the closest love and respect. When Jesus gave a piece of his own bread to Judas, it was like giving him his own body. It was a last-ditch effort to show Judas how much he loved him. Judas now knew that Jesus knew all about his plot. And yet Jesus was loving him. Judas could have repented, bursting into tears and begging forgiveness. But he didn’t. Look at verses 27–30. When he didn’t repent, the devil got a hold of him. Jesus protected Judas from Simon Peter and allowed him to go out quickly. The others had no idea what was going on. They thought Jesus had sent Judas on an errand for the meal, or to serve the poor. Judas went out into the night. He rejected the love of Jesus. This is the worst sin there is.

It was such a painful moment, but Jesus saw it differently. Look at verses 31–32. Though he would be betrayed, rejected and crucified, Jesus saw it as being glorified. He was confident that God would glorify him in himself. God would be glorified in Jesus’ sufferings, because through them he would reveal his great love for sinful people. He would sacrifice even his own Son in our places. This love is God’s greatest glory. Also, the cross would not be the end; God would ultimately glorify the Son through his resurrection from the dead.

Look at verse 33. Jesus knew he had very little time left with his disciples. He was about to give them his last and greatest instructions. Read verse 34. Jesus’ direction for his disciples to love one another was a blatant command. He gave no exceptions, and he allowed for no excuses. His command to love is absolute. He repeats his command to love one another three times in verses 34–35. It’s kind of strange for us to think of love this way, as a command we have to obey. But if we’re disciples of Jesus, we have to do it. It tells us that love starts not as a feeling but as a decision. If we’re really going to follow Jesus, we have to make up our minds, no matter how much people may upset us, to love them. And the love Jesus wants us to show may not be the kind of love we’re used to practicing. It’s not the warm fuzzies. It’s not the “if you treat me well” kind of love. It’s the love that expects nothing in return, the love that completely dies to self, a love that’s totally undeserved. Jesus set the bar very high.

How can we love the way Jesus did? We’re way too weak, way too shallow, way too immature, way too fickle to love like Jesus. But his words, “As I have loved you” give us the answer. We need to personally experience how much Jesus loves us. Paul wrote in Romans 5:8, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Jesus sacrificed his own life for us on the cross before we ever repented, while we were still in our sins, still his enemies, still in our defiance and rebellion, still in all our wickedness. When we accept his death for our sins, we can know how unconditional and how great his love is. We can sing along with the little children, “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” And when we come back to his love, it becomes our new foundation to love anyone.

As followers of Jesus, we shouldn’t just get emotional; we need to learn how to imitate his love and practice his love toward real people in tangible ways in our day-to-day lives. Jesus in fact showed us how to, by washing his disciples’ feet and sharing his bread even with his enemy, Judas. Loving one another needs to be the most important thing we’re doing, because Jesus made it such a prominent command right before he left. Sadly, we can be doing many things in our Christian life, but without his love in us. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:1–7, “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging symbol. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

Jesus also pointed to a great effect of loving one another. Read verse 35. According to Jesus, we need to be known not by our words, but by our love. It means that if our love for one another isn’t evident to people outside our community, it’s a problem. True love for one another seems to be the best way to draw people to Jesus.

In the last part of the chapter, Peter ignored the command to love and only heard that Jesus was leaving. He wanted to go with him, but Jesus in love helped him realize who he really was. Only through his own failure would Peter learn to receive the love of Jesus.