

The Glory of Footwashing and Love - John 13¹

Before the lesson: Have the handout, “A Challenge to Love”, and pens/pencils for the Transformational Exercise.

Fellowship question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, to begin some discussion, and to lead into the study):

What is one rule or commandment that you remember from a teacher in your life? (For example, “My fourth-grade teacher, Ms. Angel, taught me ‘i before e, except after c.’”)

What has been a recent “glory day” for you? (Define “glory day” however you’d like!)

Information

[Have class members stand. Give the following instructions, then read the quotes. After the class members have placed themselves near or between opposite walls of the room, identify the person who is being quoted. If your room is too small for moving, or if your class members are too shy or feeble, you might ask them to raise their fingers, 1 for disagree, 10 for agree.]

To begin this morning, I will read some quotes about love. This wall represents, “I agree wholeheartedly” with this quote. This wall represents, “I disagree with this quote.” And in-between represents the degree to which you agree or disagree with the quote. After I read the quote, place yourself somewhere on that spectrum.

[Read the quotes and let the class members place themselves where they wish.]

“A friend is someone who knows all about you and still loves you.” - Elbert Hubbard

“Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.” - Martin Luther King Jr.

“One gains a profoundly personal, selfish joy from the mere existence of the person one loves. It is one’s own personal, selfish happiness that one seeks, earns and derives from love.” – Ayn Rand

“It is not a lack of love, but a lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages.” - Friedrich Nietzsche

“Love hurts, Love scars, Love wounds and mars any heart not tough or strong enough to take a lot of pain” – lyrics of “Love Hurts” sung by Everly Brothers

“The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.” - Elie Wiesel

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[Have class members be seated.]

Which quote did you have the most reaction to (positively or negatively)? Why?

Today's lesson from John 13 is about love.

“A series of significant events that disclose who Jesus really is follows the prologue (2:1-12:50) and covers some three years (with three Passovers)...[T]hese include all the events of Jesus' career of major significance for John's [community]. With 13:1 we arrive at Jesus' final Passover and consider events that take place in rather rapid succession over a twenty-four-hour period: Jesus' final meal with his [disciples], his arrest, sentencing, and death.”²

“Now begin what are usually called the Farewell Discourses of Jesus, John 13-17....John 13 gives the 'headline' for the rest of the discourses. The primary encompassing theme is Jesus' 'love to the end' for 'his own.' Love is the repeated core concern throughout the discourses, progressing in three waves through the loving service of footwashing, then friendship with Jesus, and finally culminating in 'the summit of love' in his prayer in John 17.”³

Jesus, our Master Teacher, is giving what he calls “a new commandment” to his disciples. The setting is Jerusalem. The time is the week after Jesus entered the city in a celebration with the waving of palm branches and shouts of victory. While in town, some foreigners ask to see Jesus.

- Have a class member read John 12:20-25.

Somehow, this visit by the Greeks causes Jesus to say, “The hour is come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” Words based on the root word for *glory* (dox-ad-zo) are found 42 times in John's gospel, while the next most frequent New Testament usage is 19 times in Revelation and 9 times by Luke. “Glory” is a theme that runs throughout this gospel. For example, John begins his gospel with a description of Jesus.

- Have a class member read John 1:14.

From what we know of Jesus from his birth to his entrance into Jerusalem, what would you say was “glorious”? (miracles, healings, teachings, etc.)

That sounds different from you or me. Glorious miracles are clear evidence that Jesus is more powerful than any of us. Glorious teachings of Jesus are clear evidence that Jesus has far superior intelligence and wisdom than any of us. This kind of glory marks a clear separation – Jesus is glorious and we are not.

² Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 217.

³ David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 251, 252.

This use of “glory” is true for the first part of John’s gospel. But from this story of the Greeks’ request to see Jesus, “glory” takes a different shape. Glory means a release of the power that separates us from God and one another. Jesus emptied himself of one kind of glory to incarnate a new kind of glory.

- Have class members read John 13:1-5 and John 13:12-15.

“He loved them to the end”- “This means both ‘utterly, completely, perfectly’ and ‘to the point of death.’”⁴

“[W]ashing the feet of guests at a meal [was] an action usually performed by slaves or low-status servants. It was an onerous and demanding task because it meant washing off human and animal waste. Human waste was emptied out windows onto the city streets each morning while animal waste was ever-present. Therefore, no matter how well a person bathed, sandals and feet inevitably became smelly and dirty in the process of walking to another’s house.”⁵

What do you think went through the disciple’s minds when Jesus caressed and washed their feet?

Footwashing - “There is no parallel in ancient sources to a person of authority doing such servile work.”⁶

“To tell a slave to wash his master’s feet requires nothing out of the ordinary of the slave; to tell a master to wash the feet of a slave requires a radical reorientation of values on the part of the master.”⁷

How have the basin and towel become new symbols of God’s glory?

“Some have denied that Jesus would have washed the feet of Judas, but everything points to Judas being included. . . In this context, it might be seen as John showing Jesus fulfilling the Synoptic command to love one’s enemies.”⁸

Judas Iscariot leaves the room to set into play Jesus’ arrest.

- Have a class member read John 13:27, 31-33.

Because the verb tenses and pronouns shift around here, translators and interpreters have a difficult time determining exactly what this saying means.

⁴ Ford, 254.

⁵ Malina and Rohrbaugh, 219f.

⁶ Ford, 255.

⁷ Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 290.

⁸ Ford, 255.

“A likely solution is to recognize that Judas’ departure... set in motion the crucifixion story through which both the Father and the Son would be glorified. Once Judas left, the die had been cast: there was no going back.”⁹

[Ask if class members have the translations *The Message* or *The New Living Bible*. If so, ask them to read John 13:31-32 in those translations. If not, here are those translations of this text.]

Let’s listen to how two modern translations have attempted to make these verses understandable to our ears:

“When he had left, Jesus said, ‘Now the Son of Man is seen for who he is, and God seen for who he is in him. The moment God is seen in him, God’s glory will be on display. In glorifying him, he himself is glorified—glory all around!’” – *The Message*

“As soon as Judas left the room, Jesus said, ‘The time has come for the Son of Man to enter into his glory, and God will be glorified because of him. And since God receives glory because of the Son, he will give his own glory to the Son, and he will do so at once.’” – *The New Living Bible*

Whereas the earlier “glory” in John 1-12 has to do with power and light and superhuman miracles, now the glory that demonstrates the character of God/Jesus has to do with condescension and service and sacrifice.

“Jesus is resolutely determined to carry out *this* act that demonstrates his love for his own, portraying it in the form of service that overturns human categories of judging (7:24) and human standards of glory and honor. In his last action among them, he will ‘present himself to his disciples, as he leaves them, for all time to come in the form of a servant.’”¹⁰

- Have a class member read John 13:34-35.

“The theme of the commandment(s) recurs frequently in the Last Discourse (six or seven times) and in the Johannine Epistles (eighteen times). From the Latin for ‘commandment’ (*mandatum*) we get the name Maundy Thursday.”¹¹

“What is new about the commandment is that it directs disciples toward one another; up until now, it was mutual love between Jesus and the disciples that was underscored.”¹²

“Just as I have loved you,” Jesus says. How has Jesus loved his disciples? Let’s think of at least five ways Jesus showed that he loved his disciples.

⁹ Tony Cartledge, “Love, a new commandment,” *Nurturing Faith*, April 24, 2016.

¹⁰ Thompson, 287. Author’s emphasis. Quote is from Ridderbos, 460.

¹¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI*. The Anchor Bible, Volume 29A (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 607.

¹² Malina and Rohrbaugh, 226.

[Write answers on the board, which may include some of these: (He invited them to follow him; he taught them the highest way to live; he modeled a whole human; he loved those who had roles others hated, such the tax collector, Matthew; he healed Peter's mother-in-law; he fed them; he washed their feet, etc.)]

How do these apply to how we are to love others?

We began today's lesson with quotations about love. Some of those may have been about romantic love, but that is not the love that Jesus is referring to here. How would you describe this love?

There is in this glorification of Jesus an invitation to be united to Jesus and his Father in their love as they love one another, their children, and the whole creation.

- Have a class member read John 17:22.

“At the core of the redefinition and intensification of glory is the love of Jesus embodying the love of God... To obey this command, readers need to reread the Gospel asking two leading questions: How is Jesus loving here? and How might this inspire our loving now?”¹³

Jesus told us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. When someone asked Jesus to define “neighbor,” he told the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-27). Martin Luther King, Jr. said this in a sermon based on that text:

"I imagine that the first question the priest and Levite asked was: ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ But by the very nature of his concern, the good Samaritan reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’”¹⁴

That was the kind of love Jesus demonstrated for us. With apologies to MLK, Jesus said, “If I do not *stoop* to help them, what will happen to them?”

Another demonstration of this glorious love comes from Jesus on the cross, when he said, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” MLK, again: “This was Jesus’ finest hour: ... Jesus eloquently affirmed from the cross a higher law. He knew that the old eye-for-an-eye philosophy would leave everyone blind. He did not seek to overcome evil with evil. He overcame evil with good. Although crucified by hate, he responded with aggressive love.”¹⁵

Transformational Exercise

¹³ Ford, 266.

¹⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., “On Being a Good Neighbor,” *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 20.

¹⁵ King, 27, 28.

[Distribute the handout, “A Challenge to Love”, and pens/pencils. Summarize or invite class members to read silently the paragraphs at the top of the page, then complete the form at the bottom of the page.]

[After allowing some time to complete the form, close in a prayer something like this:] *Lord, we will never love this world with your depth of love or the sacrifice of your love. Our limited compassion again separates us from your glorious compassion. So, help us not to do what we cannot, but to do what we can, to act this week in love as you would. Amen.*

A Challenge to Love

If we are to love others as Jesus loves us, it will not be easy. Some people are hard to love.

- Some people have morals we cannot respect.
- Some people have hurt us through neglect.
- Some have hurt us through violence.
- Some have betrayed us.
- Some have shattered our trust.

Others have done nothing to us, yet we fear them.

- They speak different languages.
- They have different customs.
- They have different religious beliefs.

Those seem to be barriers to loving them.

Some people are just odd, at least to us.

We may, then, be tempted to consider ourselves to be much better people (and much easier to love, of course) than all those other people.

Here is one suggestion if we are tempted to consider others less lovable or less pure than ourselves: “Self-righteousness is the opposite of love. Jesus attacked it repeatedly...No amount of ‘goodness’ puts a person in a position to render judgment on another’s sin. Only God can do this. Growth toward perfect love in fact moves us increasingly into a deeper compassion for other people’s human frailty. Love makes us less critical as we identify with others. When you see someone sin, says one of the Abbas, say, ‘Oh, Lord, he today, I tomorrow!’”¹⁶

Use this form to name persons who are challenging for you to love and to list why this is so. Then, ask God to give you insight into one thing you can do to demonstrate Christ’s love to one of those persons/groups this week. Jot that action under “a challenge to myself”.

Who are some people you find difficult to love?

| Name/category | Reason(s) it is hard to love them | A challenge to myself |
|---------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|
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¹⁶ Roberta C. Bondi, *To Love as God Loves* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 22.