

The Inner Sanctums of Communion

The Immaturity of Saints and the Necessity of the Cross - John 13:6-8

In the previous section we read that because Jesus “knew” what hour it was, where He came from and where He was going, He disrobed and washed the disciple’s filthy feet on the night of the Passover. In this section we’ll deal with Jesus’ conversation with Peter concerning the nature of what was taking place in this upper room all the while speaking enigmatically about what was to occur tomorrow on the “hill of the skull;” Golgotha.

One of the central messages of this section is the profound immaturity of the saints and the incredible sufficiency of the cross. And O what wonderful messages these are! John sets us up for an encounter with the lavish sufficiency of the cross – after he retells Peter’s argument with Jesus over his need to be made “clean.”

An Outline of the Story

Reviewing what was previously said, we again fix our gaze on the outline of this grand chapter:

John’s Preface to the Event – 13:2-3

The Event Itself – 13:4-5

The Conversation with Peter – 13:6-11

The Instructions to the Eleven – 13:12-17

Our text will be verses 6-8.

Jesus’ Conversation with Peter – Is This Just About Dirty Feet?

It’s so important that we understand this event rightly and the different nuances of the conversation. Jesus was not doing this act for the sake of washing feet and the debate was not limited to it either. He was washing feet to articulate the nature of His life, ministry and death. And the core of the discussion is centered around these things also – even though they are not explicitly mentioned.

It’s clear that He was washing feet as an object lesson when we consider the number of enigmatic statements that we find. These enigmatic statements lead us to a deeper meaning.

In verse 6 Jesus says that the disciples will not understand this night until later (that is, after His death). If washing their feet was merely instructive then surely they would’ve understood it that night. Jesus is hinting at a deeper meaning that is shrouded with mystery; mystery that transcends dirty feet. In verse 8 Jesus says to Peter that He must wash his feet this if Peter is to have any fellowship with Him (that is, Peter must be cleansed by Jesus; by blood, not just water). Surely Peter had filthy feet over the past 3 ½ years! And it didn’t seem to hinder his relationship with Jesus; at least as far as we can tell! And in verse 10 he refers to Judas as being “not clean” even though Judas’ feet were washed by Jesus. What did He mean by “clean”

if He had just finished making Judas “clean”? Surely Jesus wasn’t just talking about these boys’ feet!

These three statements force us to grapple with the deeper meaning of the imagery of “washing” and “cleansing.” There is clearly a deeper meaning than having clean feet.

I believe two things are in view here (among many): First, Jesus is presenting the necessity of the cross. And secondly, I believe that Jesus is presenting the sufficiency of the cross. Two doctrines that, in the words of John Owen: we must “commune with.” Owen stated the value of doctrine by saying that:

“When the heart is cast indeed into the mould of the doctrine that the mind embraceth,—when the evidence and necessity of the truth abides in us,—when not the sense of the words only is in our heads, but the sense of the thing abides in our hearts—when we have communion with God in the doctrine we contend for—then shall we be garrisoned by the grace of God against all [the] assaults [of men].”¹

In this section we’ll deal with the necessity and in the next we’ll deal with the sufficiency.

Embracing the Necessity of the Cross

Jesus’ first statement concerning the disciple’s ignorance (v. 6) towards what was happening – both in the upper room and at Golgotha – was directly related to the issue of the necessity of the cross; or the necessary death of Jesus. Note the reaction from Peter once Jesus gets to him to wash His feet:

“He came to Simon Peter, who said to Him, ‘Lord, do You wash my feet?’” (13:6)

And then look how it escalates:

“Peter said to Him, ‘You shall never was my feet.’” (13:8)

Peter was challenging the necessity of cleansing. At the core of it, this challenge is a challenge of the necessity of atonement. It may appear like an insignificant dispute because Peter didn’t want Jesus to wash his feet. While that is part of it, there are underlying tensions and convictions that are driving these words.

We know that Peter was struggling with the issue of necessity because of how boldly he rebuked Jesus when Jesus spoke of being crucified. There in Matthew 16 Peter was called “Satan” and told to get behind Jesus. Peter was bold about his disagreement with the cross. And Jesus was bold about addressing that disagreement. But the disagreement that flared up then was rearing its head again. And once more, Peter was at odds with His Lord, discouraging the

¹ John Owen, *The Glory of Christ*, vol. 1 of *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Gould (London: Johnstone & Hunter, 1852; reprint, Edinburgh and Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1959)

notion that he needed to be cleansed and that the cost of that cleansing was Jesus' death. He was deeply offended by both of these ideas.

How familiar is Peter's disagreement? Is this not our natural disposition towards the Lord? Do we not all resist the fact that Jesus had to die for us to receive pardon and cleansing?

Peter was expressing deep rooted aggression and hostility towards the idea of a necessary cleansing. This aggression is manifest in two ways: First, by suggesting that the cross isn't necessary; and secondly, by suggesting that our own cleansing isn't necessary. Peter was stating his conviction that both crucifixion – on Jesus' end – and cleansing – on Peter's end – were not necessary. Peter was simply displaying the inner convictions of all men. Carnal wisdom always has and always will reject the need for atonement and cleansing; which always looks like refusing to accept the crucifixion of Jesus and refusing to be served so as to be clean.

Delighting in the Necessity of the Cross

The pronouncement that salvation is only possible through death and bloodshed (Hebrews 9:22) is one of two things to all men: bitter or sweet. We either recoil at the thought of it (because it implies that we are far worse than we believe ourselves to be) or we fall down in adoration (because we see how glorious God is to retain His justice and to display His mercy at the same time). Men either love Jesus or they hate Him for dying for them. For some it provokes rage. And for others it provokes reverence.

Humanity is thus divided into two camps: those who despise the message of the cross and those who delight in it. This was at the heart of Paul's discourse on the "wisdom and power of the cross" in 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:2. For at the initial consideration of the cross is this issue of atonement. There is no way to skirt around it. As soon as a man hears that God became a man and was crucified in the place of sinners, that man asks: "Why?!" To which the blood bought believers responds: "It was necessary if God was to spare any from eternal damnation. It was absolutely necessary. There was no other way!" At the hearing of this, some men curse God and some adore Him.

When we contrast Peter with Mary of Bethany we see Peter's theology in a new light.

Mary of Bethany understood this necessity. The different accounts of her costly offering make it clear.² And just 5 evenings prior to this one she expressed her adoration of Jesus for it. She was smitten by this understanding. So much so that in one moment she liquidated her entire inheritance. In John 12 we read an extremely important statement. We read that her extravagance in breaking her alabaster over Jesus was directly related to her understanding of the "burial" of Jesus. That is, Mary understood that Jesus was soon going to die. And at the understanding of it, Mary embraced both her need to be cleansed and Jesus' need to be

² See Matthew 26, Mark 14 and John 12

crucified.³ And this revelation escorted her into the deepest level of communion and most extravagant act of devotion in Scripture.

But as late as Luke 24, after the resurrection, the disciples were still ignorant and resistant to the idea that Jesus' death was necessary. They were completely unaware that "the Christ must suffer."⁴ And Jesus rebuked them for it.

The necessity of the cross can be seen in verses like these:

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so **must** the Son of Man be lifted up." (John 3:14)

"...without the shedding of blood **there is no forgiveness** of sin." (Hebrews 9:22)

"For the life of the flesh in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is **the blood by reason of life that makes atonement.**" (Leviticus 17:11)

"Now My soul has become greatly troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father save Me from this hour'? But **for this purpose I came to this hour.** Father glorify Thy name." (John 12:27-28)

"O foolish [dumb] and slow [thick, calloused, and unresponsive] of heart to believe in all that prophets have spoken! **Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things** and to enter into His glory?" (24:25-26)

But yet look how boldly Peter makes his stance against the Lord:

"Peter said to Him, 'You shall NEVER was my feet.'" (13:8)

"Never" Peter? What strong language! Surely this echoes Peter's rebuke in Matthew 16. I see two realities bleeding through this word "never."

First, I see the reaction of proud men when told they are in need of something that they cannot provide for themselves. That is, I see confidence in the flesh and arrogant pride rising up against God when He declares us to be unclean. I see myself here hearing the message of the cross for the first time scorning it with all my might as I must up enough delusional courage to believe myself to be 'clean.'

And secondly, I see a God who demands holiness and who in mercy provides a way for sinners to access it. Jesus was taking initiative here to wash the dirt off of these men. It wasn't they who were taking initiative. It was Jesus. Jesus disrobed Himself and stooped down to make them clean. He was signifying what He was coming to do. He was giving them a picture of what the last 33 years was all about. It was about God, who demands holiness and perfection, making a

³ The crucifixion was not absolutely necessary. It became necessary the moment God decreed to redeem man and not damn them in Genesis 3. At the very moment that the decree went forth to save, Jesus became a marked man and He submitted Himself to the task of death. And all the prophets attest to this commitment (Luke 24:25).

⁴ Luke 24:24-25

way for sin marred rebels to find mercy, pardon and favor. We must remember as we approach the cross that it wasn't we who took initiative and put Him there. God did. We put Him there by hating Him, mocking Him and condemning Him. But that was not our initiative. That was God's. His initiative to crucify His Son was driven by mercy. Our initiative to crucify His Son was driven by rage, madness and rebellion. And yet, even then, when we were unleashing all our vitriolic anger and venomous passion, we were acting in accordance with God's sovereign purposes; purposes to make a door of escape.

How Jesus Deals with Immature Saints Who Resist the Necessity of the Cross

Peter has become famous in every generation since his own because of his extraordinary displays of immaturity and stupidity. And in each instance we see how Jesus tenderly and graciously deals with him; even when He is rebuking Peter by calling Him "Satan." Not for a moment was Jesus' love or kindness suspended when dealing with Peter immaturity. And never for a moment is His love or kindness suspended when dealing with us in ours.

The question I find myself asking as I read this text is: How does Jesus deal with immature saints who resist the necessity of the cross? The answer to that question is found in the Gospel narrative. Jesus lovingly and tenderly corrects and rebukes the ones He loves by firmly telling us about the cross. In response to Peter's refusal Jesus said:

"Jesus answered him, 'If I do not wash you, you have no share with Me.'" (13:8b)

Jesus was not saying this with frustration, anger and resentment in His heart towards Peter – even after being refused to wash his feet. Jesus was bringing this young, brash and immature saint into alignment with reality. In essence Jesus was saying, "Peter, communion with Me is on the basis of holiness. And unless I provide you with it, you will have none. And if you have none, our fellowship cannot and will not exist. I have come to make you clean for I desire you to be with Me where I am."

Once again, as I noted in 13:1, Jesus had no problem saying "As the Father has loved Me so have I loved you" immediately after saying "You will all fall away from Me tonight." These 11 sincere disciples on the verge of the greatest compromise and failure of their lives were not in danger of forfeiting their position before Jesus. Of course they were going to fail Him. And of course they did fail Him! But Jesus, fully aware of what they were going to do, said "I love you with the same quality and depth of love that the Father loves Me with." They were not disqualified by their "weak flesh" because their "willing spirit" (Matt. 26:41) was seen by Jesus and esteemed greatly. We have no idea how precious a willing spirit is to Jesus.

The important truth that can be seen here – as Jesus converses with Peter in Peter's obstinacy – is that Jesus leads us through all the seasons of our accusations, disagreements and immaturity without being intimidated by them. That is, Jesus was not worried about Peter falling into rebellion. Peter was sincere. Peter was just ignorant and immature. But He was truly sincere. Jesus affirmed his sincerity while rebuking his ignorance and immaturity. But even when He

rebuked him for these things, He did so with a gracious heart of kindness and affection for this one whom He referred to as His "own."

So it is with us. Jesus leads us well and is committed to us even when we oppose Him. He will break our opposition. His will is stronger than ours. If ever there was a man with a strong will it was Peter. And Jesus had no troubles breaking his resistant heart. Jesus orchestrated a dramatic failure called "denying Him three times with cursing" so that afterwards He could strengthen him. And while Peter was going through his 72 hours of agony and misery in between the crucifixion of resurrection, Jesus' intercession was sustaining him that his "faith might not fail." And it never did. Peter fell. And Peter walked away. But Peter's faith did not fail.

Peter walked away because he was driven by a disagreement with Jesus over his need for cleansing and Jesus' need to be crucified. Think – that disagreement in Matthew 16 and in John 13 led Peter to that place of misery of being once again out on the Sea of Galilee fishing resenting the last 3 ½ years of his life. But on that precious morning he heard a voice from the shore telling him to "cast" his "net on the right side of the boat." And in that moment Peter knew that he was not disqualified from being the beloved of God because of his stupidity and immaturity. And it was he who stood up some 50 days later preaching the first sermon in Jerusalem after the resurrection of which moved 3,000 men.

"Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of His glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen." (Jude 24-25)