

# Truth for Today

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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For reply: Email: [truthfortoday@aol.com](mailto:truthfortoday@aol.com)

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**Speaker:** Dr. Gordon Hughes

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## Studies in John's Gospel: Jesus' Farewell Words - John 13

Mrs. Brown was due to go into hospital for an operation. The specialist had warned her that there was only a 50/50 chance of it being successful. She might pull through - but she might not. She had four children. Ben was the eldest, almost 16 and just about able to take care of himself. Then there was Anne, 14, then Elizabeth, 11, and finally, young Martin. He was only 8. Since her husband had died, 7 years ago now, she had cared for them alone. She had provided for them, fed and clothed them and kept a roof over their heads. She had been there to help them when they were in trouble. She it was who had had to sort out their bickering with each other.

Now she was going to have to leave them. She would be in hospital for at least a month, even if she did pull through. Who would look after them now? There were no relatives to fall back on. So on the morning when she was due to go into hospital, with a heavy heart, she gathered them round her one last time. She reminded them of what she had provided for their future, and passed on all she could remember that might help them in coming days. A mother's love could do no less!

In the next few weeks, God willing, we are going to look at that special time, just before Jesus was crucified, when He gathered His disciples around Himself to prepare them for the days and years ahead. Divine love, in all its greatness, could do no less! You will find the details in John's Gospel, chapters 13-17. Understandably, these chapters, full of sadness and sweetness, have always had a special appeal for Christians.

Today, we are going to think about chapter 13. To set it in the context of these five chapters, we might say that it sets the scene for everything that will come out in the remaining chapters. In chapter 14, Jesus then reminds them that, though He must leave them physically, they would know the abiding and indwelling presence of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We might label that chapter: Communion. In chapter 15, He tells them that in the power of that communion, their lives would bear fruit for God. We can label that chapter: Fruit Bearing. But the disciples would be left in the world. Living for Christ would bring opposition. So chapter 16 can be labelled: Suffering. Having spoken to His disciples, the Lord Jesus in chapter 17 finally turns in prayer to His Father. When, a few hours later in Gethsemane, Jesus prayed to His Father, those same disciples fell asleep and missed His words. Did they hear these words, just as we are privileged to read them in our day? If so, they must have felt, as we must do, that they were on holy ground! But chapter 13 sets the scene for all these wonderful things. So we have a very special part of the word of God before us this morning. It will help us if we divide it into three sections.

In verses 1-5, we have an example to follow;  
 In verses 6-30, a relationship to be maintained; finally,  
 In verses 31-38, a command to be obeyed.

### **An example to follow.**

The Lord Jesus had gathered His disciples in an upper room to celebrate the Jewish Feast of Passover for the last time. ordinarily, as they came in from the hot and dusty road, they would have been met by one of the servants of the house. He would have washed away the filth of the street from their feet. How refreshing that would have been! But there had been no servant there. The Passover meal was almost finished - and still their feet were hot and dirty! None of them had been prepared to do that humble service for another!

But One rises up to do just that! Who is He? Listen to the words of Scripture: "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded" verses 3-5.

This was no slave of the household. The Lord Jesus, so totally aware of His supremacy as holding all things in His hands, of His dignity as come from God, and of His acceptability as going back to God, takes the bondsman's place! Those all powerful hands hold a basin of water and a towel! What humility! What a step down! But even that step is but a pale reflection of that far greater step down which He had already taken in coming into the world, and would even yet take in going to Calvary. Listen to the words of Paul to the Philippian Christians: "Christ Jesus, who, being in

the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:5-8). That water would not be too cold to freeze them, nor too hot to scald them, but just right to soothe and cleanse tired and dirty feet. So the Lord Jesus would say to them, a little lower down in our chapter, and to us today, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (verses 14 and 15).

Are we following His example? Am I ready to take myself down a peg or two so that I might serve my fellow believer? It has been aptly remarked, "There is no queue for the bottom rung of the ladder." We are all too busy aiming for the top! How many there are who need the refreshment of God's word, of that kindly act of service! Do I stand aloof, like those disciples, thinking that others could do that service? And if I am moved to serve, how do I treat my fellow believer? Is my attitude one of coldness, like a basin of ice water? Do I erupt in anger on what seems to me their waywardness - like a basin of boiling water? or have I learned the spirit of the Master - to serve in love?

Before we leave this section, let's hear again Jesus' challenging words: "I have given you an example". But now to our second section:

### **A relationship to be maintained.**

Peter questions the Lord's action. Jesus' answer, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this" verse 7, was meant not only for that moment. I wonder did those same words come back to Peter on other occasions in the darkness of that night of denial, or as he lay in prison awaiting execution the following morning that Easter time a year or two later? So many circumstances come into our lives which seem inexplicable at the time. "Lord, why are You doing this to me?" we cry. Let these same words of Jesus come to us today, "... not ... now ... but ... after this". Sometimes we only begin to understand the Lord's ways with us after many years. And if not in this life, then we will learn the wonder of His ways when we are with Him in glory! Still Peter protests, "You shall never wash my feet!" (verse 8). Can a servant tell his Lord what He may not do? In characteristic patience, Jesus answers Peter, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." Peter's response is absolutely beautiful, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!" "Lord, I don't want any part of me to be separated from You in any way," Peter would answer. "I want my hands to be totally available for You in service. I want my outlook on life to be totally controlled by You." Is that the language of my heart, of your heart, to the Lord Jesus today?

We need now to look fairly carefully at the next words of Jesus to Peter: "He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean. but not all of you" verse 10. It's helpful to notice that the first time Jesus uses a word for 'wash' which means 'wash, or bathed, all over'. The second time, He uses a word which means 'to wash a part of the body'. Jesus speaks these words to Peter in the light of the work which Jesus would shortly do at Calvary. That sacrifice would be the basis for Peter's sins, and our sins today, to be completely forgiven. Because of that sacrifice, Jesus can say, "You are clean - completely clean!"

I well remember as a boy going out to play by the riverside. I got stuck in some boggy ground and sank to the top of my socks - clean socks put on that day! I daren't go back like that! So the socks were washed and put back on. To my inexpert eye they seemed completely clean. Almost as soon as I got through the door, my mother spotted them. To her eagle eye, they certainly did not meet the Persil washes whiter test! So the whole sorry story had to come out. Not a pleasant experience! But think of the wonder of this! Here is the Son of God Himself speaking, God who is "of purer eyes than to behold evil" as the prophet Habakkuk describes Him (Habakkuk 1:13), the One before whom even "the stars are not pure in His sight" as the patriarch Job could say (Job 25:5). Jesus, in the light of His atoning death at Calvary, looks at His disciples and can say, "You are clean!" The old hymn puts it well,

*"Clean every whit,"  
Thou saidst it Lord.  
Shall one suspicion lurk?  
Thine surely is faithful word  
And Thine a finished work.*

You and I can know that same blessing as we, too, trust the One who died for us at Calvary as our Saviour. Once unclean, but now in Him made clean!

But the Lord Jesus had to say to those same disciples, "He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet." As the traveller, setting out from home just having had a bath, would find his feet soon dirtied by the dust of the road, so the disciples would find themselves dirtied by the defilement of the world around them. There must be no barrier of sin. even the smallest speck of sin, if the disciples were to be in a fit condition to enjoy the communion of the Lord's presence as He opened His heart to them in these closing moments.

It's just the same for us today. This 'bathing all over' is a once-for-all experience as we trust Jesus as our Saviour and are made clean by Him. It is part of new birth. But we constantly face the defilement of this world. On the inside, Satan so often troubles us with evil thoughts; on the outside, the world offers its defilement on the advertising hoardings, in the press, on television. And so we need this daily cleansing from the defilement of sin if we are to enjoy close communion with our Saviour. But His promise is sure: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Yet there was one amongst those disciples who had never really trusted Jesus as his Saviour and Lord. True, like the other disciples, he had been with Jesus during those three years. He had seen the miracles. He had listened to those life-giving words of Jesus. But Judas Iscariot had no living link of relationship with the Saviour. So although the Lord Jesus can pronounce those wonderful words, "You are clean", He has to go on to add, "But not all of you". Before those precious words of chapters 14-17, Judas leaves that Passover meal to go and betray his Master. Listen to the solemn words of Scripture: "He...went out...and it was night" (13:30). But that was more than a night of physical darkness. Judas went out into a night of spiritual darkness, of eternal separation from God. The example of Judas stands as a solemn warning to us all. Now is the time to turn to the Saviour in repentance if we have not already done so, to be 'bathed all over', to be 'clean'.

### **A command to be obeyed**

As our chapter draws to an end, we cannot but linger over some of the closing words of Jesus. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (verses 34-35).

Now that Jesus was about to leave His disciples, He thinks about the future which lay ahead of them. How were they to be kept together as a loyal band of His servants? Mark tells us of a time when Jesus had just been warning His disciples of His approaching death: "Then He came to Capernaum. And when He was in the house He asked them, "What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?" But they kept silent, for on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest" (9:33 and 34). That spirit, it seemed, never left them. Divided they would fall. And so Jesus urges on them this important commandment: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another". It was important for them then. It is as equally important for us today!

When we examine the words of the Lord Jesus, we find that He left relatively few commandments. This contrasts significantly with the Old Testament system with its long lists of rules and regulations. Following Jesus is not a grudging acceptance of a system of rules, but a glad response of loving obedience prompted by His greater love for us. So the few commandments which Jesus left take on a special significance. There is His word immediately following this Passover feast, when He instituted a new feast of remembrance, the Lord's Supper: "Do this in remembrance of Me" (Luke 22:19). Are we doing that for Him? This new commandment is possibly the only other commandment which Jesus left us. Significantly, the Lord Jesus repeats it a further two times: "This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you ... These things I command you, that you love one another" John 15:12 and 17. One of the reasons why the early Church grew was that non-Christians looked on and exclaimed in wonder, "See how these Christians love one another". Why do we Christians find it so hard to do that in this 21st century? Why are we so beset by bickering and quarrels? Let's name them for what they are: acts of disobedience! Certainly, we will never be able to love one another in our own strength. Still less will we be able to love in the way Jesus said: "as I have loved you". Only in the power of His indwelling Spirit, for Galatians 5:2 reminds us that the first fruit of that Spirit is love, can we do this. To love one another is not an optional extra in the Christian life. It's His commandment! Lord, help us to be obedient.

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