

Text: John 13:1–11

Title: “The Basin and the Towel” / translated by Yea Eun Han

## 1. Jesus Loved His Own to the End

No one knows when their time on earth will end. Imagine if you had only three days left to live—how would you feel? What would you do? I’ve asked myself this question, too. If I had three days left, I would probably go on a trip or picnic to a beautiful place with my family—the people I love most. Wouldn’t you want to spend your final moments with your dearest ones?

For Jesus, less than two days remained on earth. The foot washing occurred on Thursday evening, and later that night He would be betrayed by Judas Iscariot. By 9AM on Friday, He was crucified and died at 3PM. This foot washing and Passover meal marked Jesus’ last moments with His disciples.

John chapters 1–12 focus on the signs Jesus performed to reveal who He is. Starting from chapter 13 to 21, the Gospel shifts to Jesus’ final teachings to His disciples. As a child, I always wondered why Jesus chose to focus so specially on the twelve disciples. It was a matter of “selection and concentration.” Rather than trying to change the world all at once, He poured Himself into a few who would then carry His mission.

It’s hard to love many people deeply all at once. If you divide your love among 1,000 people, it won’t leave a significant impact on any of them. But if you pour that same love like a waterfall on just a select few, real transformation can occur—and through them, others can be transformed.

Jesus poured concentrated love into His twelve disciples for three years, yet they were still slow to change. Still, as verse 1 says, “He loved them to the end.” The Greek word for ‘the end’, “**telos**”, also means “**purpose**.” It implies that Jesus loved them until His purpose—saving the world through them—was fulfilled. Even though the disciples disappointed Him—that very night they would all betray Him—He still chose to love them to the end. We are no less weak than those disciples. But Jesus never gives up on us. What a comforting and hopeful truth!

## 2. Who Is the Greatest?

What happened before the foot washing? According to the timeline in the other Gospels, just before the Last Supper and foot washing, the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest among them. While Jesus was preparing to bear the cross the next morning, His disciples were simply squabbling. How disappointed He must have felt—yet He still chose to love them to the end.

The word “world” appears frequently in this passage. The world’s operating principle is “Who is the greatest?” People have always ranked each other, striving for power. In the military, seniority is determined fairly by the date of enlistment—the earlier you enlist, the more authority you have. I enlisted on May 28, 1996. Someone who enlisted on June 2—less than a week later—would be my junior.

Our society is more complex, but the dominant system by which it operates is capitalism. Here, power is measured by purchasing ability. People strive not to fall behind. Was it any different in Jesus' time? Jesus challenged this universal principle directly by washing His disciples' feet.

### **3. Jesus Took Off His Outer Garment and Became a Servant**

Verse 4 says Jesus took off His outer garment, wrapped a towel around His waist, and prepared a basin. In Roman times, slaves were required to remove their outer clothing to show they carried no concealed weapons. Jesus doing this symbolized servanthood. While the disciples were busy trying to establish rank, Jesus was saying, "I'm the lowest in line." God Himself took off His outer garment and became a servant. Recall Philippians 2:6–7:

"Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; rather, He made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant."

Peter was direct and straightforward. He expressed that he was uncomfortable with such actions carried out by his Teacher. Jesus tried to reassure him, saying, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Still, Peter resisted. Then Jesus said, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with Me." What did He mean? Jesus envisions a world where those with power stoop down to serve. If I don't wash your feet, He says, you cannot share in My dream. John's Gospel, the last of the four to be written, includes the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet—a scene not found in the earlier Gospels. The foot washing encapsulated the very reason Jesus came to this world—it was His final and most essential teaching, one He deeply wanted to impress upon His disciples.

### **4. The Feet Get Dirty From Touching the World**

Among our body parts, only our feet constantly touch the ground. Walk outside in sandals for an hour, and your feet become filthy. If the ground represents the world and our feet represent ourselves, then our character and soul inevitably become soiled through contact with the world. Jesus understands this. He knows that living in this world, we are bound to get "dirty." That's why He tells us to wash one another's feet—not to criticize the stench and dirt, but to help clean them off. When my sons ask me to smell their feet, I instinctively plug my nose. But maybe now, it's time I start washing their feet. We need to wash one another's feet in our homes. We need to wash one another's feet in the church. Even after becoming children of God, our worldly selves are still exposed to the dirt of the world. In a world full of temptation, pressure, and contamination, our egos and souls inevitably become stained. Rather than judging others' weaknesses, we are called to bear with them and cleanse each other.

Jesus wanted to show that true service involves the body. In Greco-Roman thought at Jesus' time, physical service was deemed lowly of all work. It was thought to be inferior to intellectual work. That is why slaves were viewed to be subhuman. But Jesus directly confronted that prevailing idea. He called Himself a servant. That is why he showed himself that physical service is the true way to serve. Love should be expressed through physical actions and resources. God didn't just say "I love you"; He came in the flesh and used His body to show His love.

## 5. Washing Someone's Dirty Feet Is the Essence of Christianity

Someone once said, **“The true symbol of Christianity should be the basin and the towel.”**

This reflects the idea that washing another's dirty feet captures the core of Jesus' message. The cross itself—Jesus dying for others—is the ultimate act of foot washing.

We may not be able to die for others on the cross, but we can wash their feet. Talking behind someone's back because of their stinky personalities is not the way of Christ. Jesus wants us to take off our outer garment, bend low, and do the hard work of serving others. Otherwise, He says, “You have no part with Me.” He says, “You cannot share in My dream.”

Jesus compassionately embraces our stinky lives and loves us to the end. He will not give up on us until He fulfills His purpose—our salvation. And He asks us to wash one another's feet. Galatians 6:1–2 says: “Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ.” What should we do when someone goes astray? We are not only called to correct others, but also to examine ourselves. And we must not stop there—we are also called to help carry their burdens. No one among us is perfect. Don't use others' weaknesses for gossip. When you see someone struggling, be the one to help them. Let our church become a place through which we become clean and pure. When we stop arguing about who is greater and instead become servants to one another—serving with our whole selves—the church becomes pure. And when that happens, pure water will flow from the church into the world. Just as the Lord loved us with an unwavering love to the very end, may we too become disciples of Christ who serve and love one another to the end within our community. Will we become those who drift away, having nothing to do with the Lord, or will we become renewed and made pure through Him? When we stoop to wash the dirt from another, we ourselves are also cleansed. I believe with all my heart that our Lord longs for the symbol of One Heart Church to be the basin and the towel.