

Gospel of John, Session 15: John 13:1–30

Foot washing, and Betrayal

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Abstract

This session covers the introduction to the Farewell Discourse in John 13:1-30, focusing on the foot washing and the betrayal of Jesus. Dr. David Turner explores the historical and cultural context of the upper room, comparing John's account with the Synoptic Gospels and detailing the ancient custom of the triclinium meal. He examines Jesus' act of foot washing as a profound model of humility and cleansing, and explains the intertextual connection between Judas's betrayal and Psalm 41. Finally, the lecture discusses the theological and practical implications of foot washing for the church today.

Outline

I. Introduction to the Farewell Discourse (John 13:1–30)

A. Position within the literary structure of the Gospel of John

1. Chapters 1–12: The Book of Signs (Jesus' public ministry and miracles)
2. Chapters 13–17: The Book of Glory (Jesus' private teaching on the glory of God)
3. Chapters 18–20: The Passion Narrative

B. Terminology for the discourse

1. "Upper Room Discourse": Derived from Synoptic Gospels (Mark 14, Luke 22), though the room's location is not explicitly named in John
2. "Farewell Discourse": Highlights Jesus' impending departure, though not an absolute goodbye
3. "Testamentary Discourse": Similar to ancient deathbed testaments (e.g., Jacob in Genesis, Paul in 2 Timothy), but with the assurance of non-abandonment
4. "Transformation of Presence until Return Discourse": Theological description emphasizing the transition from physical presence to presence via the Holy Spirit

C. The theological role of the Holy Spirit (Paraclete)

1. Modulates and transforms Jesus' physical presence to spiritual presence

2. Christocentric function: Reminds disciples of Jesus' teachings and glorifies him rather than initiating a departure from his word

II. Geographical and Historical Settings in Jerusalem

A. Major geographical landmarks

1. The Temple Mount
2. The Western Hill (modern Mount Zion): Traditional location of the Last Supper, house of Caiaphas, and Herod's Palace (likely site of Pilate's hearing)
3. Kidron Valley and the Garden of Gethsemane (east of the Temple Mount)

B. Traditional sites and archaeological findings

1. Dormition Abbey: A modern abbey commemorating the traditional site of the upper room
2. Ancient stone steps near the Church of St. Peter in Gallicantu (eastern slope of the Western Hill) dating back to the first century

C. Comparison with the Synoptic Gospels

1. Chronological differences regarding the Passover timing (NIV: "just before the Passover festival")
2. Absence of the Lord's Table institution ceremony in John; emphasis is placed entirely on Jesus as the Lamb of God
3. Uniqueness of the foot-washing narrative (absent from the Synoptics)

III. Cultural Context of the Triclinium Meal

A. Definition of a Triclinium: A Roman-style dining arrangement utilizing three couches in a U-shape

B. Table dynamics and status arrangement

1. Reclining on the left elbow and eating with the right hand
2. Arrangement based on status, where leaning back against someone indicates they are superior in status
3. Position of highest authority: Couch number one (the sumus or head seat)

C. The relational positions of the disciples

1. The Beloved Disciple: Reclining immediately in front of Jesus and leaning back against his chest to speak (John 13:25)
2. Peter: Positioned to easily gesture or communicate with the Beloved Disciple
3. Judas: Positioned close enough to Jesus to receive a dipped morsel of bread directly

D. Archaeological and artistic examples

1. Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper: Famously portrays a flat table, which is culturally inaccurate compared to first-century Roman dining layouts
2. Archaeological evidence: Roman ruins at Pompeii (stone triclinium) and floor mosaics at Sepphoris showing reclining diners and serving staff

IV. The Act and Explanation of Foot Washing (John 13:4–20)

A. The physical narrative of the service

1. Jesus rises during the meal, strips down to his undergarments, wraps a towel around his waist, and pours water into a basin

2. Individually washes and dries the feet of each disciple

B. The interaction between Jesus and Simon Peter

1. Peter's protest: Questions the appropriateness of his Master performing a slave's task

2. Jesus' warning: "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me"

3. Peter's extreme swing: Requests that his hands and head be washed as well

4. Jesus' clarification: A person who has bathed (representing regeneration/conversion) only needs their feet washed (representing ongoing cleansing)

C. The theological explanation (John 13:12–20)

1. Modeling humility: Jesus, as Lord and Teacher, sets a pattern of reciprocal, humble service for his followers

2. Blessing in action: Knowledge of Scripture is not enough; blessing comes from executing what we know in daily life

V. The Betrayal of Judas Iscariot (John 13:21–30)

A. Jesus' explicit announcement: "One of you is going to betray me"

B. Identification of the betrayer

1. Jesus dips a piece of bread (possible connection to Passover haroset) and hands it to Judas

2. Satan enters Judas upon receiving the bread

3. Jesus commands Judas to do what he must do quickly, which the other disciples misinterpret as a financial errand

C. The dark conclusion: "He went out, and it was night"

D. Intertextual connection to Psalm 41

1. Quote of Psalm 41:9: "He who shared my bread has turned against me" (literally "lifted up his heel against me")

2. Context of Psalm 41: A Davidic psalm of lament acknowledging personal sin but complaining of terminal illness and treacherous enemies

3. Typological fulfillment: Jesus is the ultimate Davidic figure; the betrayal David felt is magnified in the betrayal Jesus experienced by Judas

4. Historical connection: Plausible link to Ahithophel's betrayal of King David during Absalom's rebellion, culminating in Ahithophel's suicide by hanging, mirroring Judas's end

VI. Theological and Practical Application for Today

A. Model of reciprocal, humble service: Using our life's energy to lift up and support others

B. Progressive sanctification: The foot washing represents daily cleansing from the relational and moral dirt of the world for those who are already converted ("bathed")

C. Foreshadowing of the cross: Foot washing as a precursor to the ultimate humiliation and self-giving love of Jesus' crucifixion

D. Modern expressions in church liturgy

1. Occasional church retreats, youth groups, and passion week dramas
2. Ritual foot washing at weddings between bride and groom
3. Formal church ordinances: Traditional practices within the Peace Church/Mennonite movements, observed regularly alongside Communion