

The Towel, Not the Title - John 13:1-17

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 April 2026

Preacher: Simon Lawrenson

[0:00] Because we're marking this occasion, we would normally, as you know, be going through a book of the Bible verse by verse, chapter by chapter. And so we've come to the end of Titus.

And obviously then we had a little bit of an Easter break. And so this morning I'm bringing a message from John chapter 13. So if you have a Bible, you can go ahead and turn there. If you don't have a Bible, we still have some on the back table. And you can just give us away. Even someone will bring you a Bible. You'll need to follow along just to make sure that we're not making this stuff up. And so verse one, I'll read it and then we're going to pray.

And then we'll get into the text. Now, before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of the world to the Father, having loved his own who are in the world, he loved them to the end.

During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper.

[1:07] He laid aside his outer garments and taken a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that he had wrapped around him.

And he said to Simon Peter, or he came to Simon Peter and said to him, Lord, do you wash my feet? And Jesus answered, what I am doing, you do not understand now, but afterwards you will understand.

And Peter said to him, you shall never wash my feet. And Jesus answered, if I do not wash you, you have no share with me. And Simon Peter said to him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.

And Jesus said to him, the one who has bathed does not need to wash except for his feet, but is completely clean. You are clean, but not every one of you, for he knew who was to betray him. That was why he said, not all of you are clean. And then when he had washed their feet and put on his outer garment and resumed his place, he said to them, do you understand what I have done to you?

[2:14] You call me teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If then your Lord and teacher have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet.

But I have given you as an example that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.

If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. Let's pray together. Father, thank you for your word. Lord, we thank you, Lord, that you give us this example of leadership.

Lord, and we want to take a moment again to pray for our leaders in this church. And again, Lord, that they would know you as Lord and teacher, but also follow your ways.

Lord, help them to do that. Lord, we need leaders. We need good leaders. Lord, leadership is not a bad thing. It's something that you have shown us and exemplified for us what a kind of leader we need to be, Lord.

[3:24] And Lord, we think of the leaders around the world, Lord, and how they are so different, oftentimes, from the leadership that you've shown. Lord, and we pray, Lord, for those leaders, Lord, that firstly, that they

would know you as their Lord and Savior.

Lord, but we pray, Lord, that they would lead like you lead. Lord, that they would flip the whole thing upside down, Lord. Lord, we pray for the leaders there doing deals behind the scenes there with the U.S. and Iran.

Lord, and the sad news this morning, Lord, that there's not been an agreement. Lord, we pray, Lord, that you would lead that group of other leaders, Lord, to do what is right.

Lord, we think of our friends in Iran, Lord, and we pray for Reza's family, Lord. And Lord, we pray for protection on them, Lord. And for the churches there, the underground churches, Lord, in Iran. And the churches there in the Middle East, Lord, who are, you know, subject at this time to even more aggression and targeting. Lord, we pray, Lord, for their protection, Lord.

[4:40] But we also pray, Lord, for a greater testimony and greater opportunity to talk about you. Lord, we understand, Lord, leadership is about you, Lord.

It's about heralding you and talking about you as the king, Lord. Lord, and we pray, Lord, even in this time, Lord, that there would be a greater urgency, Lord, an opportunity to talk about who is really in charge, Lord, and who is really leading this world, Lord.

And, Lord, we pray against, Lord, you know, it was you who said, Lord, that the king of this world, the prince of this world is Satan. Lord, and we pray against, Lord, everything that he's trying to do that comes against your kingdom.

Lord, and we pray, Lord, that even in these times, Lord, even in these difficult times, that your name would be made known and your kingdom would come to bear.

Lord, we want to thank you for this text, Lord. We want to thank you, Lord, that as we open it, Lord, we know that your spirit is going to be teaching us. Lord, we pray, Lord, that it would be him who teaches us this morning.

[5:49] Lord, so help my words, help our ears, help our hearts to receive. Lord, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. So, leadership is, of course, one of those subjects that everybody's got an opinion about.

Everyone. We admire it and we also critique it. And we've probably all been shaped by it for good or for harm.

But when we come to a moment like this in setting apart elders in the life of the church, it forces us to ask a deeper question about what leadership looks like in the kingdom of God.

And we're all leaders. Okay. So, just because we've installed some leaders, you know, over our church and for our church, we're all leaders in some way.

And so, as we look at this text, we might go, well, this is a good opportunity for me to snooze for 40 minutes or so, give or take an hour.

[7:00] But it's not. Why? Because we're all leaders. We all lead in some way. And look, if we're honest, if you just, you know, Google what is leadership, you'll get a whole bunch of answers.

You know, leadership is influence. Leadership is visibility. Leadership is authority. And sometimes even the church, we subtly kind of absorb those instincts, but we also get confused about what leadership is.

But in John 13, we are confronted with something completely different. And actually, I have five, only five this morning. So, we're only on one slide.

We have five things, five things I wanted to say about this passage. And they're all coming on the screen all at the same time. Okay. So, five things. This will shock you. You will resist this.

You actually need this. You must keep receiving this. Now go do this. Is that clear enough? Some of you are like, no. That's okay, because we'll get there, right?

[8:02] So, this will shock you. We will resist this. You actually need this. You must keep receiving this. Now go do this. And this is a message for all of us. So, here's the first thing.

This will shock you. What does leadership look like in the kingdom of God? Not just a teaching. Not as a principle. But as a picture. And here's the picture.

You see in this text. Not a picture of a man rising or ascending over. It's a picture of a man kneeling. Now, the fact that you see a picture of Jesus kneeling should shock us.

Let us sit for a minute. Jesus is kneeling. He's not kneeling as he will do in prayer before his father.

He's kneeling in front of some pretty ropey disciples. And look at what the text says in verse 1. Now, before the Feast of Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

[9:18] Now, notice that even though Jesus knew that his hour had come, his disciples had no clue. Right? Because what's happening around the table, according to Luke 22, is that the disciples are bickering and arguing about who gets the best seat at the table.

Right? So, you've set that up as this contrast. You've got the group of disciples just arguing and bickering. And we gather by verse 23 or verse 28 of this chapter that John won that argument.

The guy who's writing this. Because it's John who sat at the right hand of Jesus. And it's the one that Jesus, he says of himself, the one that Jesus loved, the one that lent on his chest.

He's the one that won the argument. And interestingly, this is the only time this is mentioned in the Gospels. John is the only one to include this. And I think that there's some kind of thing going on with John.

He's just like, oh, you remember that argument that the boys had? The argument that I won, you know what happened next? I was just completely humiliated. And so he includes this.

[10:33] He says during supper, verse 2, when the devil had already put it in the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going back to God.

So look, the first thing that Jesus knew was that it was his time to die. We say that in verse 1. But he also know that the events coming up were planned for him by God.

That's what that phrase, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hand. And then even more so than this, he also knew where he had come from. He knew his identity, that he had come from God, John says.

And so he knew where he was heading. He knew his destiny, destiny that he was going back to God. Jesus knew all of this. The disciples didn't have a scooby-doo.

And so at this point, and we saw this throughout when we were studying through Timothy and Titus, that Jesus absolutely was secure in who he was, in his identity.

[11:39] And because of that, he was able to then go and give himself fully in service. And so verse 4 tells us that he rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments and taken a towel.

He tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and he began to wash the disciples' feet and wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

And if that doesn't shock us, it's not because it's not shocking. It's because we've probably heard it so many times we've kind of gone numb to it, right? We know this story, don't we? Or our understanding of Jesus and who he is is so familiar that we no longer grasp his greatness.

Like the shock moment isn't that there's feet washing going on, right? In our culture, yes. Like if you, and this has happened to me, like if you walk into a church service and they're washing feet, like you want to make sure you've got your best socks on, right?

Not the ones with holes. Terrible. In our culture, that's quite different. It's quite shocking maybe. But in the Middle East, the ancient Middle East, not shocking at all.

[12:52] Pretty common. What is shocking is that it's Jesus is the one doing it. And of course, this isn't the first time there has been a little bit of a question and outrage about the washing of feet in the New Testament.

You remember in Luke chapter 7, there Jesus was in the house of Simon the leper. And a woman shows up with this expensive fragrant oil and starts weeping over Jesus.

And her tears. She anoints Jesus' feet with her tears and then with the oil and then starts kissing his feet. And the Pharisees, of course, they see this and they try to tell Jesus, what are you doing?

What are you doing? And Jesus kind of replies, yeah, but you didn't even give me any water. Right? In other words, Jesus wasn't even shown the minimum amount of respect and honor and welcome in that house.

And then almost the same thing happens actually in the previous chapter to what we've just read in John chapter 12. Just before Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, a similar thing happens and

there's a little bit of outrage.

[14:11] However, the shocking of those moments are this one outdoes them and outdoes them both. And this is why when we come to verse 6 and we come to Simon Peter, Simon Peter says to Jesus, Lord, do you wash my feet?

Like, and the emphasis is, do you wash my feet? Like, we've got this the wrong way around, Jesus. What are you doing? And so notice the second thing.

This will shock you. Second thing. You will resist this. Because we are not Jesus in this story.

Amen? Who are we in this story? Peter or Judas? But we'll get to that in a minute. None of us want to be Judas or Peter, right?

But look, Peter is us. Look at verse 6. Lord, do you wash my feet? And Jesus answered, what I am doing? And I just, you know, I struggle to read that verse because I remember it in the King James Version.

[15:17] What I do thou knowest not now, but thou wilt know in the hereafter. That's the King James. I love that. Because like, that's just, it's just poetry. What Jesus is saying is, you don't know what I'm doing now.

You've got to have faith in what I'm doing now is good and right and proper. You will know eventually, but not right now you won't know. And so Peter said, that's never going to happen.

That's not the King James Version. That's the Simon Version. Verse 8, he says, you shall never wash my feet. And look, it sounds like humility. Lord, you shall never wash my feet.

It sounds respectful. It sounds like Peter is actually honoring Jesus, but it's not humility. This is false humility. Because what Peter is really saying is, I'm not comfortable being served like that.

I'm not comfortable being exposed like that. I'm not okay with being that needy. This is all about Peter.

[16:29] This is not about Jesus and putting Jesus in his rightful place. This is Peter's problem. I'm not comfortable. I'm not okay with that. And look, I think if we're honest, we're far more like Peter now than we'd like to admit, aren't we?

We naturally don't think of ourselves as needing cleansing or needing washing, right? We think in categories like improvement and direction and growth and self-help.

And so we'll say things like, well, I just need to get my life together. Or I need a little bit more discipline. Like we could probably all say that and it'll be true, right?

I need better habits. And again, that might be true. They're not wrong. But they are nowhere near deep enough, are they? Because Jesus doesn't come offering a better plan for your life.

He comes saying, you need washing. And there's something about that that we're like, I'm going to resist that. Like I need help? Yeah, okay. I need help.

[17:31] I need direction? I need direction. I need more discipline? Absolutely. I need help forming habits? You bet. You need washing? Ah, yeah. Improvement assumes you're basically fine and you need a boost.

Cleansing assumes something deeper is wrong. That there's some kind of guilt or sin or stain or defilement that you can't remove yourself.

And that's where we start to resist because cleansing means I can't fix it. I can't hide it. I can't manage it. It means letting Jesus close enough to deal with the parts of my life that I'd rather keep covered.

It means admitting not just I've made mistakes, but there is something in me that needs to be made clean. And that is uncomfortable. And so like Peter, we push back.

We dress it up, maybe in religious language. Lord, I'll serve you. Lord, I'll follow you. Lord, I'll do better. But Jesus says gently and firmly, unless I wash you, you have no part in me.

[18:43] He doesn't say go and grab the next self-help book that comes up. However helpful that might be. He doesn't say that. In other words, what he's saying is you don't start with what you can do for me.

You start with what I must do for you. And then notice the third thing. You actually need this. Jesus answered Peter and he says, if I don't wash you, you don't have any share with me.

That phrase share with me is both covenantal and vocational. Jesus is saying, if you are not washed, we can't walk together or be on mission together. So what Jesus is saying is simply that

this isn't optional.

This is essential. You don't belong to him unless he cleanses you. And actually, when you think about it, this is not new.

This is not a new thing, right? And this connects us all the way back to the Old Testament. In Exodus chapter 30, excuse me, in Exodus chapter 29, when Moses is told by God to bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the tent and meeting.

[19:58] And what was he supposed to do at the tent and meeting? Wash them with water. Right? So it takes us all the way back to Exodus. In Exodus 30, the priests were told when they go into the tent and meeting or come near to the altar to minister to burn food offering to the Lord, you shall wash with water so that you may not die.

Like essential, not optional. And the lesson is that cleansing was required to approach God, not just symbolic, necessary.

When we were going through the book of Leviticus, like so much of that entire book, but particularly chapters 11 through 15, like introduced the detailed procedures for washing the body and clothes to restore ritual purity.

They're not there just to fill the pages. They mean something. And it's continued through the Old Testament. So, you know, when you get to the prophets, they viewed this cleansing, not just as something practical to do before God, but something that was a spiritual act.

Right? So in Isaiah chapter 1, the Lord tells Isaiah, wash yourself, make yourself clean, remove the evil of your deeds before my eyes cease to do evil.

[21:25] And of course, that kind of accumulates into the act of Jesus then on the cross, where John writes in his first letter, if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus, not water now.

So this is now symbolic, the blood of Jesus. What does it do? Well, it cleanses us from all sin. Paul says that the church in Ephesians chapter 5, he says, now the church is now cleansed by the washing of water with the word.

And so there's this idea that goes all the way through the Bible that we need this. This is not optional. It is necessary. And although we don't practice fish washing these days in this church, we don't do that.

You can relax. The truth is that before you can serve Christ, you must be served by Christ. And you see in the Old Testament, priests washing themselves before serving.

But listen, the point is that in John chapter 13, Jesus washes others. There's a shift. The priest is no longer preparing himself. The priest is preparing his people.

[22:44] And that's huge because Jesus is not just an example of a servant. And like sometimes, Laurie and I were chatting about this week, like we boil this section of the Bible down into, oh, what a great example Jesus is.

And of course, he's a great example. But that's one level, that surface level reading of the text. He is, what is he doing? He is setting apart a people for himself.

That's what he's doing in this text. He's washing. That's why it says, if you do not wash, or if I do not wash you, you have no share with me.

You and I actually need this. We need this washing. And in verse 9, Simon Peter said to the Lord, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.

So, you know, so suddenly Peter swings to the other extreme, right? Which we know that Peter does, all right? He's like, well, they're not just my feet, my hands, my head, all of me.

[23:47] And you can almost hear the kind of, in his voice, the emotion, the urgency, the little desperation, because now he understands that this matters.

Like, if being washed means belonging to you, then don't give me a little, give me everything. And there's kind of something deeply right about that.

Because when it finally clicks, when you realize that Jesus is not just offering advice or encouragement, but cleansing and renewal, it awakens a longing.

And we should feel that longing this morning. Like, I need this. A kind of a longing that responds like Peter.

Then all of me, not just my feet, every part of me. Don't hold back. And look, your leaders need this too.

[24:49] You know, we're here installing elders, but listen, these men are not spiritually superior to you. They're not beyond sin.

They are people who still need grace every single day. And look, the biggest problem with church leaders is not that they are human and prone to make mistakes.

That's not the biggest problem. The biggest problem is when they and the church that they serve forget that they are human and prone to make mistakes.

Good leaders are not sinless leaders. They need washing like everyone else. Now, look, fourthly, this will shock you.

You will resist this. You actually need this. Fourthly, verse 10, you must keep receiving this. Jesus said, The one who has bathed does not need to wash except for his feet, but is completely clean.

[25:59] And you are clean, but not every one of you. For he knew who was going to betray him. That's why he said, not all of you are clean.

So look, verse 10 can be a little bit confusing because it seems a little bit contradictory. Unless we understand that Jesus is probably referring to the way that people in the Roman Empire bathed.

And without going into too much detail, you'll thank me. You'll know that the Roman Empire, throughout the Roman Empire, in the towns and cities across the empire, they established public baths in the cities.

And you'll know that if you've been to Bath. I rest my case. And many other places throughout the country, there are the remains of these baths where you would go and you would clean.

But listen, upon arriving at home, you would still need to wash your feet. That's Jesus's point. The roads were dusty. The roads were dirty.

[27:03] And so you would go to a bath and you would literally, the word in the Greek is you would disinfect your whole body. And once you had disinfected your whole body, you would walk home.

And before arriving home, you would clean your feet because your feet got dirty on the way. Jesus is using the same idea. You don't need saving or washing every time an altar call is given.

You know that. Right? This is not like some kind of youth rally where you go every year and get saved every year. Right? You don't need that like any more than a Roman needs to go back to the public baths just because their feet became dusty on the way home.

But you do need that continuing washing by the Holy Spirit as he carries on that work of renewal and transformation in your life.

Because Jesus says something very striking in verse 10. He says, You are clean, but not every one of you. And then John tells us in verse 11, For he knew who was going to betray him.

[28:11] And that's why he said not all of you are clean. So in that room, and get this, this is, again, we will resist this, but understand this. In that room, there are two realities sitting side by side.

All of the disciples have their feet washed. How many is all? Every one of them. They all have their feet washed, but not all of them are truly clean.

That's what Jesus has just said. Judas has the water on his feet. But not the cleansing in his heart. And that's a sobering thought. That Judas had Jesus kneeling at his feet. And still walked away unchanged.

Which means that we can be physically present. Outwardly involved.

[29:19] Even close to Jesus in proximity. And yet not actually be changed on the inside. Judas heard Jesus teach.

What a remarkable thing that must have been, right? Judas saw the miracles that Jesus did. He had his feet washed by Jesus himself.

But he was never truly washed with him. And here's where the work of the Holy Spirit becomes so crucial. Because the difference between Peter and Judas is not that one was more flawed than the other.

We know of Peter's failure. Spectacular. We know of Judas' betrayal. But the difference is this.

Peter is ultimately washed and keeps coming to be washed. Judas resists that deeper work. This is what the Spirit does.

[30:35] The Holy Spirit doesn't just bring us near to Jesus externally. He brings the cleansing of Jesus into us. Jesus says a couple of things in John 16.

He says that the Holy Spirit will come and he convicts of sin. Then a few verses later in verse 13, he says that he will guide us into all truth. And then Paul wrote to Titus and told him that there is a washing, a regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.

Which means that the Holy Spirit keeps applying the cleansing work of Christ to the deepest part of who we are. So when we say you need ongoing washing, we don't mean repeating salvation. We mean that the Spirit is continually exposing what is unclean in all of us. He is leading us to repentance.

He is reshaping our desires. And he is forming Christ in us. And the warning and the invitation in this passage is don't confuse outward closeness with inward cleansing.

[31:51] Don't confuse those two things. It is possible to attend a church and serve in ministry and even be trusted with responsibility and still resist the Holy Spirit's work in your heart.

And Judas is the clearest example of that. That's the warning. The invitation, however, is to be like Peter.

Not in his impulsiveness, but in his openness. Like even when he fully doesn't understand and Jesus has to say, you don't get this now, but someday you will get this.

Just trust me right now. Even in that, he comes forward to Jesus. After his failure, he returns.

And after his another failure, he returns. And his multiple failures, he just keeps returning. And so let me ask you, when the Spirit convicts you, what do you do?

[32:57] What part of your life are you keeping Jesus away from? And maybe the most important thing to say is this, that the evidence that you truly belong to Jesus is not that you never get dirty, but that you keep coming back to be washed.

Judas had his feet washed, but not his heart. Peter had both and kept returning for more. John writes that if we confess our sin, he's faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Cleanse us. And then look, finally in verse 12, let's finish the story. When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, do you understand what I have done to you?

And we gather at this moment, there were some blank faces looking back at Jesus. Because he just continues.

He just carries on right away. He doesn't wait for an answer. He doesn't wait for Peter just to pop up and kind of give his kind of sentence of, you know, impulsiveness. He says, do you understand what you have done?

[34:22] You call me teacher and Lord and you are right for so I am. 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 also should do just as I have done. And so finally, now go do this.

It says there in verse 14, if I then, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. Look, this isn't optional either. He said, I've given you this as an example, which basically means when I came into the room, you should have done this, not me.

Now again, before we run and get the buckets, relax, we're not going to do that. This simply means that the posture of our lives should be about serving one another.

That's what our posture should be. It's not, and again, give you the context, it's not about who gets the best seat of the house. According to Jesus' language, the best seat of the house was at the feet of his disciples.

[35:45] And look, it's worth saying this, church leaders don't cleanse anyone. Do you get that? That's what Jesus does through the Holy Spirit.

Like in the Old Testament, priests washed externally, they offered sacrifices repeatedly, but no one, none of them could ever cleanse. That's why we have that repetition of priesthood and then the prophets, and then all of a sudden Jesus comes and Hebrews chapter four says, he is the great high priest.

He is the only one who can cleanse. Hebrews 9 says that through the eternal spirit, he offered himself without blemish to God to do what?

To purify. Same word, to wash. That's what he does. So that we can draw near and full assurance of faith, washed.

And now he calls leaders, and he calls all of us to take up the towel, not the title, the towel, and follow him.

[36:55] Jesus didn't stand at a distance and demand cleanliness. What did he do? He knelt in the dirt and he made us clean. And now he says, you're clean.

Jesus has done that work. The Holy Spirit is in you and Jesus has shown you the way. So now let's go. Let's pick up the towel and go wash others in his name.

Let's pray together. Father, thank you for your word. Lord, we so want and need to be washed by you. Lord, we recognize, Lord, so many promises in the world to cleanse us, to wash us, to start again, to renew us.

Lord, and some of them might be helpful. They might be, Lord, but none of them are needful. None of them are necessary. The only one that is necessary is the washing that comes through you and by you.

Lord, and some of us might sit and stand here this morning and we might have been cleansed. We might have been disaffected by you. You might have saved us, Lord, but we still need washing each and every day.

[38:11] And so again, we say, Lord, would you wash us? Would you wash our hearts? Would you cleanse us anew? Lord, would you renew and restore the things that only you can do? Lord, would your Holy Spirit continue that work in our lives, that work of restoring, that work of renewal, that work of cleansing?

Lord, we're so thankful, Lord, that we can come to you, Lord, and we can confess our needs to you, Lord, and our sins to you, knowing that as we do, you are faithful and just and you cleanse us. Lord, what a beautiful picture that is. And for some, Lord, this morning, that might be needful. And Lord, you might be putting that on our heart in a greater way this morning.

We just thank you for that. Lord, we want to be like Peter and respond to you and not like Judas and harden our hearts towards you. And so, Lord, as we come before you in singing and worship, we ask, Lord, that you would just help us to confess those things that are on our hearts, to, you know, reclaim those things, Lord, that you've promised.

Lord, to announce again, Lord, to our own lives, Lord, that you are in the business of renewing and cleansing. And so, we ask that you would do that work again.

[39:37] As David prayed, create in us a clean heart, O God. Restore a right spirit in us. Cast not your spirit away from us, but restore us. And Lord, as we've prayed for our new leaders, Lord, we pray, Lord, for us as a church, not just for our leaders, but us as well, that we would respond to them and to the work that you're doing in them.

Lord, we pray, help us, we pray as a church. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.