

LESSON 10 *February 28–March 5

True Greatness



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *John 13:1-30, chapter 17.*

Memory Text: “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (*John 13:15, NIV*).

Key Thought: Instead of becoming self-absorbed as He approaches His great humiliation, Jesus, in John 13–17, expresses His loving concern for His disciples.

T rue greatness is to follow Jesus in the path of service and humility. For many, greatness consists in the accumulation of wealth, fame, and power. To such, the opportunity to “wash feet” represents the ultimate humiliation. Jesus here does the opposite of what seems natural to human experience.

With chapter 13 the entire tone of the Gospel of John is transformed. Instead of public ministry, Jesus retires to an unspecified place to quietly instruct His disciples at great length.

This lesson and the next cover John 13–17, the portion of the Gospel that deals with the “upper-room experience.” Because of space limitations, we will deviate from the order of the Gospel here. In this lesson we highlight the common elements of chapters 13 and 17, where Jesus’ concern for His disciples is expressed in the foot washing (*John 13*) and in a marvelous prayer (*John 17*). In the next lesson, we cover chapters 14–16, where Jesus’ concern for His disciples is expressed in the gracious provision of the Comforter.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 6.*

SUNDAY February 29

The Foot Washing *(John 13:1-11).*

Read John 13:1-11 and then in your own words write down what you think this account means and why the Holy Spirit directs John to include it in his Gospel. Focus on what you believe is the key message to us here.

It was the custom in New Testament times for people to bathe themselves before attending a feast. Upon arrival, they would not need to bathe again; they needed to have only their feet washed. The washing of the feet, then, was like a ceremony that preceded entry into the house where they were to be guests. In this case, however, something so much greater was going on.

Read John 13:10-12. What does the text reveal? Why does Jesus, nevertheless, wash the feet of Judas? How does that act, in its own way, symbolize what foot washing is all about?

The full-body bath represents the complete cleansing that a person receives at the beginning of the Christian life (baptism). Foot washing, on the other hand, represents the Christian's ongoing need to deal with the soiling that comes from daily contact with the sinful world and its contamination. The foot is the part of the body that in ancient times came in regular contact with the earth and, therefore, needed continual cleansing.

The beautiful lesson that comes through in Jesus' action is that our daily shortcomings as Christians do not call our original cleansing into question. It is not necessary to be rebaptized or to start all over every time we make a mistake. One who has bathed needs only to wash the feet again! We are secure as long as we do not choose to turn away (*see also John 10:27-29*).

The image of Jesus washing the feet of His disciples represents His forgiveness of sins committed after baptism. The image of the disciples washing one another's feet signifies our willingness to forgive those daily irritations and transgressions that threaten the unity in love that Jesus purposed for His disciples (*see also John 13:34, 35*).

What does it mean to "wash feet" in the context of everyday life? How can we be willing to "wash" one another's feet? What does it take to be able to do that?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Key Text: *John 13:15*

Teachers Aims:

1. To contrast Jesus' idea of greatness with the worldly concept of it.
2. To study Jesus' example as it relates to our relationships with one another.
3. To understand Jesus' will for succeeding generations of believers.

Lesson Outline:

I. True Greatness (*Phil. 2:5-7*).

- A. In a worldly sense, greatness is measured in tangibles: wealth, power, popularity.
- B. Jesus' greatness was shown in humility, without concern for the trappings of greatness.
- C. Jesus' view of greatness was quite incomprehensible to His contemporaries, especially to Judas, and remains so for many today.

II. Washing Feet (*John 13:5*).

- A. Jesus' washing of His disciples' feet represented leadership as service.
- B. Foot washing was a ceremony of unconditional welcome.
- C. It is difficult to be arrogant and self-serving when washing someone's feet.

III. Jesus' Vision of the Future (*John 17:21*).

- A. Jesus wanted to be known to future generations through the goodness and greatness of His church.
- B. Love was to be the major identifying feature of the church.
- C. This love was to result in unity.

Summary: Jesus' ideal for His followers is not only vastly different from that of the world; it runs counter to it. He calls us to be servants of one another and of humankind and to ignore the desire for self-aggrandizement, which comes naturally to us and often is considered a necessity for worldly success.

COMMENTARY.

With the Cross only a day or so away, Jesus has a heart-to-heart talk with His disciples and prays for them. This week's lesson covers John 13 and 17, as it outlines three of Jesus' concerns in developing discipleship: (1) the pattern of leadership, (2) the perils of power, and (3) the power of prayer.

I. The Pattern of Leadership: Be a Servant.

Even as the disciples were preparing for the Last Supper, they were arguing about who among them would be the greatest (*Luke 22:24*). Jesus' answer is unique in the history of leadership. A pharaoh, a Nebuchadnezzar, a Caesar, a Katherine the Great, or a



MONDAY *March 1*

True Greatness *(John 13:12-17).*

What is Jesus' further purpose in washing the feet of the disciples?
John 13:12-17.

True greatness is the King of the universe walking over to the corner of a room, picking up a towel and a basin of water, and stooping down to wash the feet of an unstable disciple such as Peter and a traitor such as Judas. True greatness does not need to brag or assert itself. It takes true greatness to exercise self-control or to act the role of a slave. It takes true greatness to do the right thing when everyone laughs at you or despises you in his or her heart.

True greatness is to have the same attitude as Jesus (*Phil. 2:5*), who was "in very nature God" (*vs. 6, NIV*) yet took "the very nature of a servant" (*vs. 7*) and "humbled himself" (*vs. 8*). True greatness is to "consider others better than yourselves" (*vs. 3*). True greatness is to follow Jesus in the path of service and humility.

In contrast, if our first thought in any situation is of our own advantage and self-interest, we are pursuing a false greatness. If our first reaction to any situation is to nag, belittle, criticize, and complain, we are exhibiting the opposite of humility and true greatness. Putting other people down says "I am better than you." Considering others as better than yourself causes you to uplift, encourage, and praise.

How can we develop true greatness? How can we learn to love a life of service? *John 13:12-17, 15:4-8, 2 Cor. 3:18.*

Does the way your local church practices foot washing capture the spirit of Jesus' command? If not, how can you change that situation? Does your local church carry out Jesus' example in its relationships with people inside and outside the church body? How can the foot-washing service become a more meaningful part of our Christian experience?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Genghis Khan sees leadership in terms of power and authority over others. But the Lord of the universe reversed the definition of leadership: “ ‘Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’ ” (*Matt. 20:26-28, NIV*).

A true leader is first and foremost a servant. Servant leadership is difficult to understand and even more so to practice. The life of Jesus, however, is an example of continuous service—from Cana to the Cross, from Nicodemus to the paralytic at Bethesda. At the Last Supper, when Jesus “took a towel, and girded himself” to wash the disciples’ feet (*John 13:4-15*), He taught yet again that fulfillment comes not from power but service. That is why He commanded, “ ‘Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you’ ” (*vss. 14, 15, NIV*).

“Be like Me,” Jesus is saying. “Serve like Me. Love like Me. Live like Me.” It is not enough to take the title of deacon or deaconess, elder or pastor, bishop or president. Take the towel instead. Without becoming a servant, there can be no leadership in ministry. A ministry of servanthood is based on the underlying principle of all God’s commandments—the principle of love. When such a pattern of leadership is followed, the world will take note of its power (*vss. 34, 35*).

II. The Perils of Power—Beware of Self.

If authoritarianism is one danger to Christian leadership, self-assertion to the point of setting aside the Lord is another. Judas is the perfect example of the latter. One of the saddest statements in Scripture is this: “Satan entered into [Judas]” (*vs. 27*). Self-dominated Judas so much that arrogance, accusation, pride, avarice, and even betrayal did not seem inappropriate to him. Even being Christ’s disciple was just an avenue to achieve self-glorification.

Such a goal blinded Judas to the true meaning and intent of following the Lord. Thus, when a devout follower of Jesus anointed His feet with a costly ointment, Judas denounced the act as a foolish waste (*John 12:1-8*). Judas weighed life in terms of the cashbox he carried with him. But Jesus pointed out that true living is in self-abandonment. That was a bitter pill for treachery to swallow, and Judas succumbed to the perils of power and sacrificed the privilege of discipleship.

III. The Power of Prayer—Be a Prayer Warrior.

With the Cross staring Him in the face, Jesus gave His disciples the key to victorious living: prayer. John 17, the longest recorded prayer of Jesus, has three parts: (1) a prayer for Himself, (2) a prayer for His disciples, and (3) a prayer for the church.

TUESDAY *March 2*

Judas: The Other Path to “Greatness”

(John 13:18-30).

What purpose does Jesus have in predicting His betrayal? In what way does the principle shown here work all through prophecy? *John 13:18, 19.*

How does the knowledge of His coming betrayal affect Jesus? *John 13:21-26.* Why should it have hurt Him so much? What do these texts tell us about God’s feeling toward even the worst sinners?

“The disciples knew nothing of the purpose of Judas. Jesus alone could read his secret. Yet He did not expose him. Jesus hungered for his soul. He felt for him such a burden as for Jerusalem when he wept over the doomed city. His heart was crying, How can I give thee up?”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 645.

But Judas chose to follow a different path to “greatness” than that exhibited by Christ in the foot-washing service. On this particular point he considered himself wiser than Christ. Surely it was obvious to anyone that greatness came from power, wealth, and the esteem of others! But his logical course of action led only to personal destruction.

“The prospect of having a high place in the new kingdom had led Judas to espouse the cause of Christ. . . .

“It was he who set on foot the project to take Christ by force and make Him king. . . .

“[He hoped to secure] the first position, next to Christ, in the new kingdom.”—Pages 718–721.

Judas failed to realize that anybody can act great or demand to be treated as great. Anybody can spend money or command others, given the opportunity. It takes true greatness to act the part of a servant and do tasks that others should have done. It takes true greatness to put others first, to treat others as better than yourself.

Is the typical view of greatness in today’s world more like that of Jesus or Judas? How can one best present the message of Jesus to people who are used to a different kind of greatness?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

For Himself, He makes two petitions (*vss. 1-5*): (1) that He will be able to meet the agony of the cross so that the Father's love and justice for this rebellious planet might be vindicated and (2) that through Him, eternal life would be available to all who come to Him.

For His disciples, Jesus prays that they will be protected by the power of God's name in order to remain united (*vs. 11, NIV*). He also prays that " 'they may have the full measure of [Jesus'] joy within them' " (*vs. 13, NIV*). Christ intends for His people to be

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Mark 16:16; Luke 22:42; John 13:14; 14:22-24; Revelation 5:9, 10*

- ❶ Foot washing is, among other things, a reaffirmation of our commitment to Jesus, in contrast to a complete rebaptism. Yet, in the church today, we have examples of people being rebaptized. When might there be instances where rebaptism is justified?
- ❷ In the world, status is symbolized by the types of tasks one is expected to perform. In the context of John's Gospel, we are not shocked by Jesus' choice to wash the feet of His disciples. How might we react, however, if we saw present-day leaders performing such low-status tasks? How is it possible for our own expectations to interfere with our perception of what is really important?
- ❸ What theological truth does foot washing reflect? What principle of the Christian faith did Jesus reflect as He washed His disciples' feet? Through this ritual, what did He teach us about how we should relate to strangers who mingle among us?
- ❹ Judas apparently felt his way was better than Christ's. He might have even felt that Christ would come around to his way of thinking if He understood the situation as well as Judas did. In what circumstances do we try to do God's thinking for Him?
- ❺ In Jesus' final prayer with His disciples (*John 17:1-19*), He prays for Himself and for the courage to do what is necessary. Why do you think He needed to pray this prayer?
- ❻ Jesus prays for the church to achieve an ideal. Has the church ever met that ideal? Did Jesus expect it to do so? Is there a sense in which at least some parts of the church throughout history have achieved this level of spirituality? Explain your answers. What is our role as individuals in helping the church reach this ideal?

WEDNESDAY *March 3*

Jesus Prays for His Disciples (*John 17:1-19*).

Read carefully *John 17:1-19*, focusing on the question: **For whom does Jesus pray here, and why?**

The farewell gathering of Jesus and His disciples (*John 13-17*) draws to a close with an intercessory prayer in three parts. In *John 17:1-5* Jesus prays for Himself. In verses 6 to 19 His attention turns to His disciples and to their need for support in the absence of His physical presence (the third part we'll look at tomorrow).

The initial goal of Jesus' prayer is for help in completing the task of glorifying the Father on earth (*vss. 1-5*). This task will be accomplished on the cross. There never has been a clearer picture of the character of God than that exhibited by Jesus in His humiliation and death. But Jesus prays for strength to complete this task, not to benefit Himself or His Father only but for the sake of all who will believe in Him. When Jesus and His Father are glorified on the cross, eternal life becomes available to those in relationship with Jesus (*vss. 2, 3*). So, even in His prayers for Himself, Jesus' ultimate goal is the glory of His Father and the benefit of others.

Jesus then focuses His prayer directly in behalf of His disciples, who soon will have to learn how to live without His physical presence among them. He does not pray for the world but only for those who have renounced the world (*vs. 9*). He prays for His disciples, because they will have to remain in the world when He goes away, and they will become the object of the world's evil attention. As in chapter 13, Jesus' coming humiliation does not draw out concern for Himself; rather, it directs His attention to the consequences of His "going away" for His disciples.

Read verse 14. What does it mean to be "not of this world"? In what ways should we, as Christians who are in this world, be "not of this world"? How could we know whether we are or are not?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

happy. He further prays that God will not take His disciples out of the world but that He will protect them from Satan (*vs. 15, NIV*). The world is the object of our mission, not the master of our souls. Finally, Jesus prays that His disciples will be sanctified by the truth—God’s word (*vs. 17, NIV*).

For the church of all ages, Christ prays for unity (*vss. 20-26*). So essential is Christian unity that Christ links it to the abiding purpose of His incarnation—“that the world may know that thou hast sent me” (*vs. 23*). To bring about division within the community of the faith is to deny the Incarnation and the Cross!

“Unity with Christ establishes a bond of unity with one another. This unity is the most convincing proof to the world of the majesty and virtue of Christ, and of His power to take away sin.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 1148.

Witnessing

“Go to the ant . . . consider her ways, and be wise” (*Prov. 6:6*). Ants are referred to as social because they live in colonies. Each ant in the colony has its own role in working for the benefit and survival of the whole colony. Worker ants search for food, feed the young, and defend the colony against intruders. The queen ant spends her life propagating the colony. The sole purpose of the winged male ants is to mate with the queen. Though small in size, the ant can be considered one of the greatest creatures on earth because of its selfless purpose in life.

We have as our example men and women in the Bible who were great, not so much because of who they were but because of the One they represented. They represented Christ, who lived a life of service. They, too, are remembered by what they did for others.

As a slave, Joseph worked diligently and remained faithful to the Lord. Because of his faithfulness, Pharaoh exalted him to second in command of Egypt. But even in this position, he worked hard for many years for the well-being of others.

Esther was queen. Yet, she gave no thought for her own life when given the opportunity to save the lives of her people. She used her status not for her own benefit but for the benefit of others.

Let us seek greatness not by earthly gain or recognition but by serving others. In reaching out to meet the needs of others, we will discover many avenues for winning souls to Christ.

THURSDAY *March 4*

“But for Them Also Which Shall Believe” *(John 17:20-26).*

Whom else does Jesus pray for in John 17? *John 17:20.*

What does He pray will be the common experience of both the disciples and the second generation of Christians? *John 17:21-24.*

In the last part of Jesus' prayer, He turns to the second generation of Christians. In the fullest sense, this second generation includes all Christians who have never had an encounter with Jesus in the flesh.

When the love that Jesus prays for produces unity in the church, the world will come to know that Jesus is truly the One who represents the character of the Father on earth (*see also John 13:34, 35*). On the other hand, the world never will be seriously attracted to Christ through the instrumentality of a church that is bitterly divided.

In Jesus' prayer we catch a glimpse of one reason prayers do not get answered. Every provision has been made for the church's unity. But the evident disunity of the church in general shows that even Jesus' prayers can be frustrated by the stubborn and self-serving human spirit. There are many things God would long to do for the church if only His people were willing to allow Him to do them.

Another remarkable thing about this chapter is the idea of Jesus praying for His disciples and for us. With all the power Jesus displayed in the course of His ministry on earth, He still saw great value in praying for others. Prayer for others accomplishes things in this world that never would happen otherwise.

For most Christians, however, prayer for others can be an up-and-down experience. So, it helps to have a regular time set aside for prayer. It also can be helpful to make a prayer list, as long as the list is not so long that it becomes unmanageable. But most important of all, it helps to have some kind of accountability in the prayer life, a prayer partner or a prayer group that encourages one to keep on when the going gets tough.

Look carefully at John 17:26. Jesus prayed that the love the Father had for Him would be in us, we who claim to follow Jesus. What is that love? Would it not be the most perfect love possible? How, then, can we manifest that love in our lives? Is perhaps the lack of unity among Christians one manifestation of this lack of love?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: “There is a legend of St Francis of Assisi. In his early days he was very wealthy; nothing but the best was good enough for him; he was an aristocrat of the aristocrats. But he was ill at ease and there was no peace in his soul. One day he was riding alone outside the city when he saw a leper, a mass of sores, a horrible sight. Ordinarily the fastidious Francis would have recoiled in horror from this hideous wreck of humanity. But something moved within him; he dismounted from his horse and flung his arms around the leper; and as he embraced him the leper turned into the figure of Jesus. The nearer we are to suffering humanity, the nearer we are to God.”—William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: John 2*, p. 138.

Thought Questions:

❶ Have you ever watched someone care for a loved one who is ill? The person will stoop to do the most menial services, the most repulsive chores—chores as vile as cleaning up vomit! Yet, in situations where love is not the motivating factor, we may feel contempt for doing such humble acts and scorn to lower ourselves to do tasks we consider beneath us. What lessons of humility did Jesus teach when He stooped to wash the dirty feet of His disciples?

❷ Abraham Lincoln had many enemies. But when he died, even his enemies acknowledged his greatness. So it was with Jesus. True greatness is immortal. The title of this week’s lesson is “True Greatness.” Make a list of the characteristics you think the Seventh-day Adventist Church needs to possess in order to exhibit true greatness.

Application Question:

Jesus knew where He came from, why He was on earth, and where He was going. Everything He did was centered around who He was. Ask yourself: Who am I? What am I here for? Where am I going? How does such self-awareness help spiritual growth? On the cross, Jesus cried out to His Father “Why hast thou forsaken me?” How did separation from His Father affect His spirit? Why is it important for us, as humans, to be continually connected to our heavenly Father?

FRIDAY *March 5*

Further Study: Read some of the great “farewell speeches” of the Bible outside the Gospel of John (*Gen. 47:29–49:33; the whole book of Deuteronomy; Joshua 23, 24; 1 Chronicles 28, 29; Acts 20:17–38; 2 Tim. 3:1–4:8*). What are the common elements in all these discourses? To what degree does Jesus in John 13–17 conform to a common literary pattern? In what ways does He deviate from earlier examples? If you were to give a farewell discourse to your family and friends that was based on the biblical model, what would you say?

In John 17 Jesus talks about “glorifying” His Father and being glorified Himself (*vss. 1, 4, 5*). This concept of glory is a central theme in the Gospel of John (*John 1:14; 2:11; 7:18; 8:50; 12:23, 24; 14:13; 15:8; 17:10; 21:19; in some texts translators may substitute words such as honor*). It is also a significant component of the first angel’s message in Revelation (*Rev. 14:6, 7*). What do these texts imply about the word *glory*? How does the reading of these texts impact your life? How can we “glorify God” in our lives today?

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What kind of unity was Jesus praying for? Is it possible to have unity of faith without unity of doctrine or belief? How wide a difference in belief can there be before disunity appears?
- 2 Why is knowing Jesus the key to eternal life? When Jesus talks about eternal life in John 17:3, is He thinking in terms of quality of life now, or is He thinking only of heaven?
- 3 Read carefully John 17:17. What is Jesus saying there that shows how crucial the Bible is to our spiritual life?

Summary: The key point of this lesson is that true greatness is not found in power, wealth, or fame; it is found in following Jesus along the path of service and humility. Jesus demonstrated this path when, in full awareness of the Cross He was about to experience, He nevertheless was more concerned for the impact of the coming events on His disciples than He was for Himself. In washing the feet of His disciples and in praying for them, as well as for us, Jesus did the opposite of what comes naturally to the human spirit. In so doing, He set for us an example of true greatness.