

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.

True 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 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?

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?

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?

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?

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?

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.

Life-Saving Change

by NARANTSETSEG and RAVDANDORG

Ravdan: Like most of the people in Mongolia, we had no meaningful religion. We felt hopeless and did not know where to turn for help in our lives. We thought that education, money, possessions, and a good name were all there were in life. Nothing seemed to bring us happiness.

Nara: One day while on a train to another city, I met two young women, Jolly and Orna. We talked, and the women invited me to visit their little church in Darhan. I had not been to a Christian church before and was not even sure there was a God. But I decided to go, just to see. After all, it couldn't hurt to try God. Besides, I hoped that they would help us with food and other things, as some churches do.

I visited the church a few times and felt God's presence there. Ravdan did not mind that I went and took the children, but he warned me to be careful of strange new religions.

Ravdan: Then the church leader came to visit us and talk to me about God. He did not tell me what they thought, just what the Bible says. His visit helped me understand what my wife and children were learning in church. But I did not attend the church until months later.

Then Nara invited me to evangelistic meetings the church was holding. I wanted a better life; I was not happy with the way we were living. So when I saw that the church was helping my wife and children, I decided to try it, too. God opened our eyes, and I learned the truth. We all went together, and by the end of the meetings, we decided to let God be the head of our home. We were baptized.

God has taken our sad, hopeless life and given us a peaceful life, full of love for others. We never dreamed that God would change our lives so dramatically,

that we would become Christians and would share our new faith with others. It is not easy to get people to listen to what God has to tell us, but we can let them see the change God has made in our lives, and we pray that they will want a better life too. Now we have our own small group that meets in a room we rent.



NARANTSETSEG and RAVDANDORG live in Darhan, Mongolia.