

## **“A New Commandment” 13:1-17, 31b-35**

Now before the Feast of the 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. 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. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking 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 was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And 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." 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? 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 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."

"Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.' A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

This is the evening when Jesus said to His disciples: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

How does it sound? This is one of those "love one another" verses. There are quite a few of them in the New Testament. Sometimes people hear these words of Jesus and go like: "Of course, that's just common sense!"

It is? Let's reflect on what happened of that fateful evening and I hope we will be able to discover just how **radical** this new commandment is, how incredibly **hard** it is, and how **easy** it is to keep it. How radical it is, how impossibly hard, and how easy to keep.

So, first about how radical it is. I will try to illustrate it, but I don't think it is actually humanly possible. On the one hand, our words are just too weak to communicate such realities, and on the other hand our comprehension is too shallow to grasp the depth of what happened.

We will try with God's help. So, what happened? "Jesus rose from supper ... He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him." What a big deal?!

Many churches practice this ritual on Maundy Thursday. It does symbolize the humility that we as Jesus disciples are to espouse. It is a nice reminder that we are supposed to serve one another, and not to fight for our significance.

But what a big deal if a pastor washes the feet of his members, or a bishop of his pastors? Surely, it may appear a bit out of place, but still within our grasp. Not so with Jesus, not on that evening.

To wash someone's feet in the first century was the task of slaves. One of the lowest and most menial tasks. Jesus' disciples probably could come to terms with the situation where a disciple would wash his teacher's feet. A stretch, but okay.

But there is not a single instance in the ancient literature that would describe an incident where someone higher in their status washes the feet of someone of the lower status. What an embarrassing and challenging experience it would be for Jesus' disciples! Most of them just endured it in silence.

But Peter as usual spoke up, most likely voicing what was on everyone's mind. "Lord, you shall never wash my feet!" It would have been shocking and emotionally painful an experience for Jesus disciples.

We all are used to relate to one another in certain ways. Every society has their written and unwritten norms of behaviour. And suddenly Jesus did something that literally tore apart the fabric of their society, the ground was moving under their feet... They had been waiting for Jesus to become a king, with all the glory that comes with it, but, instead, – He was washing their feet.

"Do you understand what I have done to you? I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you." "Do you understand?" They didn't. At that moment it was still impossible for them to understand it.

We are in a better position. We can keep looking deeper at what was going on. The Scriptures enlighten us. Just a few verses earlier, in chapter 12, there is something remarkable written.

John quotes Isaiah the prophet, where the Holy Spirit foretells that people will not believe God's message, that they will reject His Messenger. And then John writes something ... just listen! "Isaiah said these things because he saw His glory and spoke of Him." Isaiah said these things because he saw His glory?

Whose glory? Who is John speaking about? Yes, He is speaking about Jesus... Now you should be saying: “Wait, wait, did John just say that Isaiah saw Jesus?” Yes! And when did that happen? We know exactly when.

Isaiah has recorded it for us: “In the year that King Uzziah died I saw Yahweh sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings:

with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh, the Lord of heavenly hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”

Seven centuries earlier Isaiah saw the same person, who was now washing the feet of His disciples – Yahweh, the Lord of hosts, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, Isaiah saw His glory and He couldn’t even stand in His presence.

One thing is for a Rabbi to wash the feet of his disciples. That’s shocking enough. But this... What Jesus did illuminates for us what Paul wrote: “He [the Son of God] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant... And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

This is how radical this new commandment is. It is hard for us to fully grasp it, we can hear the words, but we can’t grasp their full meaning. But then Jesus said to His disciples: “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.”

Now, that leads us to our **second point. How hard** this new commandment is! How impossibly hard for us! It sounds nice “love one another”. It may invoke some warm feelings of heartfelt friendships and mutually caring relationships.

But, please, don’t get carried away! Let’s first see what the Scripture says. Who did Jesus love? We could say that He loved His closest disciples, His friends. Sure, but hold this thought, let us see, who were those people.

Peter, John and James. Three disciples from Jesus’ inner circle. Peter was already famous for saying the wrong things. Just a few hours later he will make his notorious confession. Not just once, but three times.

“I don’t know that man!” And immediately the rooster crowed... Boastful coward, we could say. John and James – as Jesus was heading to Jerusalem to suffer and die, His closest were arguing who is the greatest among them. John and James went to use their special relationships with Jesus to secure the best seats in His new government. Power-greedy and selfish.

The same goes for all disciples. They all were saying that they will rather die than abandon Jesus... just to abandon Him a few hours later. Don’t forget about Judas! “The devil had already put it into his heart to betray Jesus.” Traitor and thief...

But the Eternal Word, who became flesh, whose glory Isaiah the prophet saw in his vision – He washed their feet. It wasn’t easy for Jesus to love His disciples. It

is not easy for Him to love us. Whatever ugly and despicable traits you can see in his disciples, just look in a mirror... we possess them all. We may claim that we are such good Christians just to ignore Jesus' words when we don't like them.

We may boast about our allegiance to Jesus, just to turn around and pretend "I don't know that man", only to please people whose opinion for us is more important than what our God thinks about us.

It is easy to be a brave Christian when we are among other Christians, but as soon as we are among people who believe differently, who may be hostile to the Gospel, we too often want to act like "little Peters".

How often we try to be good Christians not for the sake of Jesus, but so that God would bless us, would give us what we want and would protect us from losing what we truly value. We may not love Him, but we really love His gifts.

It is not easy for Jesus to love us. We should at least try to see the depth of His love, of His commitment. Paul puts it well in his letter to Romans, where he reminds us that Christ Jesus died for us when we were still His enemies.

Please, meditate on this... Jesus, the Eternal Son of God, whose glory fills the earth, He humbled Himself to death, even death on a cross... for whom? For His enemies. And we were once among them...

It is an impossibly hard commandment for us. We love those who love us. We may also treat well those, from whom we need something. But what about those who betray you, use you, hurt you, ignore you, abandon you, and don't value you much. How to love them unconditionally? It is so hard...

And here we come to our last point. Remember what it was? It may sound like a contradiction after everything we reflected on, but I suggested that this new commandment actually is easy to keep. How could that be?!

Listen carefully once more to what exactly Jesus commanded us! "Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another." This new commandment doesn't begin with a command. It begins with Jesus. It begins with God's love to you.

"As I have love you..." How did He love us? "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he ... was going back to God [...] he loved them to the end." Or we can translate it as – He loved them absolutely.

What happens with us, when we move up in life? Especially if we move really high. We tend to occupy ourselves with important stuff. We have no time for small and insignificant people. But see what Jesus did!

When all the power and authority are given in His hands, He humbles Himself, He drops on His knees and washes His disciples' feet. Do you understand what His attitude is to us, to you?

He is the same glorious and awesome heavenly being whom Isaiah saw. And He loves you. Till the end. Absolutely. Unconditionally. Self-sacrificially. And He is the answer to why it is easy to keep this new commandment.

Remember what happened with the disciples, with the cowardly and ambitious little rubble? They went to the ends of the earth. No risk, no danger was too great for them. No prison, no beating can hold them back. No threats could silence their bold proclamation. All, but John were violently murdered because they just wouldn't stop preaching about this Jesus.

How could they do it? Because they had received the same gift that you have received. They were loved by Jesus Christ. By the Eternal Son of God, by the Holy God the Maker of heaven and earth.

They knew that they were so loved by this most glorious and beautiful Being. His love changed them. As it changes us. When you know that you are so loved – and by whom! – nothing seems too hard anymore.

The closer you come to Jesus, the more you know His love, the easier it is to keep this new commandment. For Jesus didn't just give us a commandment, He gave us Himself. Even today He gives Himself to you.

And that is why, embraced by our brother Jesus, and by our loving Father who is in heaven and by the Holy His Spirit, we too are free to give ourselves to others, free to love one another as Jesus has loved us. As Jesus still loves you even now.

A new commandment. So radical. Yes. Hard. By all mean. Easy. Indeed.

Amen.