

The Object Lesson of John 13: (part one of a four part study)

Object lessons can have a significant and lasting influence on those who observe them. They are designed to take an abstract principle and make it very applicable for everyday life. Jesus knew that His disciples were in need of one for several reasons, each of which motivated our Savior to demonstrate the one recorded for us in John 13:1-17. In the larger context of God's purpose, this lesson also became necessary due to the arrival of a critically redemptive moment.

It was Thursday evening, the Passover was Friday, the one on which Christ would become the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world by means of His death on the Cross. Jesus' "hour" had come. It would be followed by His burial and resurrection from the dead, as well as His ascension into heaven. So our Lord desires to provide a lesson which would resonate with His disciples for the rest of their lives. With that in mind, the apostle John begins chapter thirteen by giving us a clear view of the big picture, writing this in verse one –

“Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.”

The more immediate context also called for an object lesson with lasting impact. In Luke's Gospel account, we learn that during the Passover meal, after they had partaken of the bread and cup, an argument broke out among the men as to who would be the greatest in God's kingdom (Luke 22:24; cf. Ecclesiastes 4:4). Jesus resolves the dispute by saying this in vv25-26 –

“And He said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called ‘Benefactors.’ But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant.”

In spite of the difficulties associated with harmonizing John's account of the Last Supper with that of Luke, common sense points us toward viewing the action taken by Jesus, as the necessary follow-up to His resolution of the disciples' foolish dispute. So our Lord humbles Himself and undertakes the menial task of a servant in washing their feet. Upon completing it, He indicates that this object lesson should serve as an example for them to follow, with promised blessing in its fulfillment (John 13:13-17). Many interpretations have been derived from Christ washing His disciples' feet, with one that stands out above the others in expressing the practical application intended by our Lord and Savior. In washing the disciples' feet, Jesus stressed the importance of **“humbling serving one another.”**