

# SERVANT AUTHORITY

by Ray C. Stedman

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One of the striking characteristics of our day is the passionate concern which we frequently see expressed over who is to blame for certain disasters that have been part of our recent national history. We have just seen the conclusion of separate libel suits by two famous generals, one an Israeli and one an American, over two widely debated disasters which occurred. We find this apportioning of blame at every level of life -- in the home, in government, even in the world of sports.

When I was in school I learned, "It matters not if you win or lose; it's how you play the game." But today we're being told, "it matters not if you win or lose; it's how you place the blame."

Behind this issue of placing the blame lies the issue of the nature of authority. Where does authority come from? That is one of the critical concerns of our day, as it is in every generation. This is the theme that comes to the fore as we begin the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of John. Here the apostle shifts his focus from the public ministry of Jesus to the multitudes to the intimate privacy of the Upper Room, where Jesus has gathered with his twelve disciples to teach them.

Jesus once said, "I have come that they might have life. and that they might have it more abundantly," {cf, John 10:10}. That verse divides the teaching of Jesus into two main sections. The first twelve chapters of John speak of the giving of eternal life to men and women. In these chapters Jesus offers himself as the sole source of eternal life. In the section to which we now come, Chapters 13-17, his concern is the development of that life.

Having a baby is one thing, but once the baby is born our concern is how that life grows and develops into adulthood. Parents know that is a process that has important aspects to it. This process of developing eternal life till it becomes abundant life is what will occupy our attention in the remaining chapters of the Gospel of John.

As the Lord enters the Upper Room with his disciples it is a somber and crucial hour in his ministry. The shadow of the cross looms larger and darker over his pathway. The disciples are nervous and tense as they see the growing opposition of the authorities to Jesus, and the evident plot to do away with him. It's clearly evident that John has deliberately supplemented his account to what the other gospels report. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke the central feature of the Upper Room is the institution of communion, the Lord's Supper. But, strikingly, John does not mention this at all in his account. In its place, however, he gives us an incident which the others gospels do not report: The washing of the disciples' feet. John, of course, wrote his gospel long after the other gospels had already appeared, so he is deliberately not reproducing everything they say. Rather he gives additional details of our Lord's life.

John introduces this section with unusually significant phrases:

**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. And 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 to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded. {John 13:1-5 RSV}**

The most important question about any event is not so much what happens, but why it happens. This seems to be John's concern as he focuses on the motives behind the washing of the disciples' feet by Jesus. Why did

Jesus do this? John gives six powerful motives that pressed upon Jesus and led to the footwashing.

The first reason is evident: "Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, ..." Jesus knew the time was short; his hour of departure was at hand. The end of an era is always a critical time, a time of pressure. When you know you must leave a place where you think seriously about what is happening. Jesus feels this Passover is the divinely appointed time. All through his ministry he knew he was to be the "Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world," {cf, John 1:29}. He also knew this would occur when the nation was gathered to offer the Passover lamb, the feast that was instituted in Egypt as the angel of God's wrath passed over the houses of the Israelites when he saw the lamb's blood upon their doorposts. In that rich and redolent symbolism, our Lord sees himself. The time has also come when he, as the grain of wheat, must fall into the ground and die. He sees, as a result of his death, a great harvest of Jews and Gentiles to follow.

Secondly, he was moved by an overwhelming sense of love for his disciples. Listen to these beautiful words, "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." One version has "unto the uttermost." He knew what was coming and he dreaded and feared it. But, for the sake of the disciples, he pressed on, despite his own reluctance. Within twelve hours of this event he is hanging upon a cross. Later in this discourse he says to his disciples, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends," {John 15:13 RSV}. No one can go further in his expression of love for someone than to die for him. John sees this occurring here: He loved his disciples "unto the uttermost."

One of the lessons we learn from the Gospel of John is that the relationship which Jesus had with his disciples is the relationship he will have also with us. He loves us "unto the uttermost," as well. Nothing we do, or fail to do, in foolish ignorance, will stop him from loving us unto the end. He may have to discipline us. That is an act of his love. He may bring remarkable experiences into our lives, but we may be sure that underneath all is his loving concern for us. How important it is for us to remember that. Jude, one of Jesus' brothers, writes, "Keep yourself in the love of God," {cf, Jude 1:21. God loves you, and out of that love everything he does with you will flow. This is our assurance: Having loved his own, even though he was about to be tortured and to pass into a dark struggle that no man can comprehend, he did not think of himself but only of those whom he loved.

The third motive follows: "And during supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, ..." Jesus was always aware that in the invisible kingdom that surrounds us there are powers of darkness, of deep enmity against us. These are master psychologists who know how to insert thoughts into our minds and hearts that will lead us into hurt and destructiveness. Jesus knew that the devil was bringing about a crisis and that he had determined to use Judas to betray him. The Greek wording here is very interesting. The English text says "the devil had already put into the heart of Judas ... to betray him," but the Greek text says only, "the devil had put into the heart" (not necessarily the heart of Judas) "that Judas would be the one to betray him." Perhaps the editors are right here in saying that it was into the heart of Judas that the devil put the thought to betray Jesus, but some commentators take this to refer to the devil's heart. They suggest that he had determined in his own heart to use Judas as his victim to betray the Lord. By this time Judas was a helpless servant of the devil, so that what the devil had determined in his own heart would be carried out. Dr. F. F. Bruce translates this, "The devil had already resolved that he would use Judas Iscariot to betray him." This indicates how easily we can be victimized by the devil. He can put thoughts into our minds and hearts and, if we follow them, failing to realize that Scripture declares them to be wrong, we will end up betraying our highest hopes. There is the third motive: The devil, the enemy, is at work, closing in on Jesus, and he knew it!

The fourth motive is, "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, ..." Our Lord knew he was the director, the one in charge of events. He was not, therefore, a victim of a "Passover plot." A number of years ago a Jewish writer wrote a book entitled *The Passover Plot*, in which he suggested that Jesus was the helpless victim of scheming among Jewish leaders and Roman authorities to put him to death. But these words make very clear that such was not the case. Jesus was in charge of events. He knew what he had to do, and he himself would see that it was carried out.

The fifth motive was, "[knowing] that he had come from God and was going to God, ..." Jesus knew exactly

who he was. He knew his origin: He had a deep sense of his own identity. Those who know who they are, we say, are "secure." They cannot be derailed, or turned aside from what they are determined to do. Knowing who they are, they have a deep sense of security. Throughout this account Jesus never panics. He is always in control, moving with a quiet majesty through the events of his arrest and his appearance before Herod, Pilate, and the chief priests. He is in full control because he knows who he is.

How important for Christians to understand this. It is one truth which the New Testament constantly thrusts upon us! When you are facing pressure at home, in your job, or wherever, pressure to give in to something you know you should resist, the Scripture urges you, "Remember who you are. You need no longer be the victim of the wiles of the enemy; you no longer must obey him. You belong to God. You are part of the Kingdom of love, not of anger and fear. You are loved and cherished by your Father. Your sins are forgiven."

I remind myself of this truth over and over again. Every time I feel weak or despairing, unable to function properly, this is the truth that delivers me. These are facts that cannot be changed.

John calls this to our attention that we may understand the majesty and dignity with which Jesus moves through these events.

The sixth motive, and the one most immediately pressing upon him, is implied in Verse 5: "Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded." Jesus took off his outer garments, leaving himself with nothing but the loincloth of a slave, and began to wash the feet of the disciples. It is evident from this account that the disciples ought to have done this. Undoubtedly there had been many occasions in the past when they had done so. In those days it was customary for a servant to wash the feet of anyone entering a house from the dusty roads. Why didn't one of the disciples do this?

Luke's account of that evening helps us at this point. In the 22nd chapter of his gospel, Luke says, as Jesus was about to institute the Lord's Supper, the disciples began to argue among themselves who was the greatest. This probably began as they debated who would be next to Jesus. We have been influenced by Leonardo da Vinci's wonderful painting of the Lord's Supper, portraying Jesus and the disciples seated at one side of a table, and thus most of us have a wrong picture of this scene. (Someone has said that painting gives the impression that Jesus has just said, "All you fellows who want to get into the picture come over to this side of the table!") But Jesus and the disciples didn't sit in chairs, rather they lay on couches, on their left sides, with their right hands available for eating. This accounts for the fact that John lay "on Jesus' breast," as his head was right next to Jesus' head. It is clear also that Judas lay on the other side of Jesus. Somehow he had managed to place himself next to Jesus, which later allowed Jesus to hand him a piece of bread to indicate that he was the traitor.

So the disciples began to argue over who was greatest. Like children who won't do their assigned work (washing the dishes, for instance) because they're angry at each other, they refuse to acknowledge whose turn it is, until one is made to do it by a wise parent. This was happening in the Upper Room as the argument over who was the greatest went on. Each of the disciples said to himself, "I'm not about to wash that turkey's feet! I'm above all that. We're about to see the Messiah manifest himself as the Deliverer" and "I'm so close to Jesus I shouldn't have to do this kind of work." But Jesus waited until they were all reclining around the table, no one having offered to do the foot washing. Without a word he rose, took off his garments (reducing himself to the position of a slave), and, kneeling in front of each disciple in turn, including Judas, washed his feet and dried them with a towel. They were shocked, stunned, and embarrassed. They didn't know what to make of this.

John goes on to the meaning of this act:

**He came to Simon Peter; and Peter said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not know 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 part in me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" {John 13:6-9 RSV}**

How grateful we ought to be for Peter, the representative Christian! He always does what we would have done if we had been there. Here we can learn how the Lord would have treated us, had we been present.

According to John, Peter does three things:

First, in typical fashion, he displays his utter ignorance: "Lord, do you wash my feet?" In the original this question is very emphatic. The two pronouns are placed together, as though Peter said, "Do you my feet wash?" Clearly he is offended by the Lord's actions, because he has totally misunderstood the nature of authority.

Like us, Peter has been brought up to view authority as a hierarchical structure. Authority belongs to the man at the top, and the sign of it is that people serve him, doing for him what he wants them to do. The mark of authority is that others work for you or under you. The whole world operates on this basis. How many people do you have under you? How many people work for you? In business, home, school, sports, the military, political life, everywhere, that is the invariable view of the nature of authority. Peter was offended because the Lord ignored that. The one at the top, the one with true authority, in Peter's view, ought to be served. But here the One who clearly deserved to be served was instead serving. Peter was offended by that, perhaps because he hoped one day to have a degree of authority himself, when he himself would be served.

Jesus describes Peter's problem, and ours, when he says, "What I am doing you do not know now, ..." Peter did not understand what Jesus was doing because he did not understand the nature of true authority. Ignorance was his problem. Jesus does not rebuke Peter for that, rather he makes him a promise: "but afterward you will understand." The commentators differ as to when this "afterward" came. Some say it was not till Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came, that the disciples understood. That is perhaps true. At Pentecost they began to understand many things they did not understand earlier. But I believe our Lord is here simply referring to the explanation that he is going to give at the end of his actions. At the moment, however, Peter does not understand. He thinks this is all a matter of politeness and courtesy, a matter of washing dirty, uncomfortable feet. Jesus' doing that makes him uneasy; he should not be doing that. That was the limit of his understanding. But Jesus' promise was that in a moment he would understand it meant much more.

Peter's reaction to this promise is typical of him: "You shall never wash my feet!" He's so sure he's right, and so totally unaware of the pride, self-righteousness, and ignorance wrapped up in his statement. Oh, the Peter in all of us! Failing to understand, he simply asserted himself: "You will never wash my feet. I'll never let you do that." Jesus responds to this statement with a warning, not a promise: "If I do not wash you, you have no part with me." (It is not as the RSV says, "no part in me." Dr. F. F. Bruce says, "it is dangerous to interchange prepositions." Here is one place where that has occurred.) Jesus told Peter, "You will have no part with me. You will have no fellowship, no companionship, no sense of my presence with you." Jesus is not talking about beginning the Christian life, but of enjoying it, of progressing in it. He thus indicates to Peter there is more to this than meets the eye: "If I don't wash you (whatever that may mean) you will have no part with me." It is a serious matter.

That's all that Peter needs. Again, in typical fashion, he swings to the other extreme, demonstrating his love for Jesus in these words, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" "Lord, if it means I'm going to lose you I don't care about theological arguments, wash every part of me! Do whatever it takes." That is a wonderful response, coming from a thoroughly loving heart. It indicates why Jesus always deals graciously with Peter, as he does with us. He looks on the heart. Many Christians don't have their doctrines straight. They say things wrong, but their hearts are right. They love the Lord, and want very much to have a relationship with him. That, too, is Peter's desire, which he manifests in these impetuous words.

In response, Jesus gives a full explanation. This is the critical part of this whole passage. Our Lord gives a two-fold explanation, for there are two great truths, one theological and one intensely practical, which are symbolized by his action. This is what he wanted them (and us) to learn.

First,

**Jesus said to him, "He who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but he is clean all over; and you [plural] are clean, but not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "You are not all clean." {John 13:10-11 RSV}**

There is a natural logic about this. Jesus is simply indicating what was true in the culture of the day. Everybody took baths in the morning, and thus were "clean." But as they went about the dusty streets their feet became dirty. This didn't mean they needed another bath, however, they only needed to wash their feet. In this beautifully symbolic teaching, in ways they could never forget, Jesus explains what he means. To the disciples (with the exception of Judas) he says, "You are clean." What does he mean by that, and when did it happen? From this and other Scriptures we know that he is talking about what Paul calls "the washing of regeneration" {Tit 3:5}, of being born again, of being renewed by the Spirit, of becoming a new creature in Christ. That has only to occur once. In fact, it can only occur once. Paul speaks of this in the letter to Titus when he says, "We are saved by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord," {cf, Tit 3:5 RSV}. That is the beginning of the Christian life. All but Judas, among the disciples, had already experienced it.

Recently, I attended a banquet at which Luis Palau was the main speaker. I was delighted to hear Luis emphasizing a most important quality of the gospel, that it can change people instantly. He told several striking stories about hardened people who had lived their lives in sinful rebellion, and of his saying to them, "When you come to Jesus, in just a few minutes you can be an entirely new person." These people did come and their lives were dramatically, drastically changed. That is the glory of this good news, and that is what Jesus speaks of here. It is a bath to which we are all invited.

There is a fountain filled with blood,  
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins.  
And sinners plunged beneath that flood  
Lose all their guilty stains.

That is regeneration, and it only occurs once. Some Christians become confused here. They think every time sin comes into their lives they must be saved all over again, as though the Holy Spirit had stuttered when he said, "Regeneration," pronouncing it "re-re-re-regeneration!" No, it's not that. Once is enough.

"But," Jesus continues, "you do need to wash your feet." What does that symbolize? John tells us in his first letter, "If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness," {1 Jn 1:9 KJV}. That is the daily walk -- the daily cleansing. We don't need a new birth again and again, but what we need is to acknowledge daily the evil in our lives, to admit it to God. If we confess our sins to him, tell him where we've gone wrong, where we've been unloving and disobedient, "he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." What hinges upon that is our fellowship, our companionship with Jesus.

If you want the sense of Jesus going with you through all of life, learn every day to acknowledge your sinfulness and let him cleanse your feet again. I try to start out every morning by acknowledging my need for cleansing from the mistakes I made the previous day. I confess, and acknowledge before the Lord, the unkind words and tones I might have used, the wrong attitudes I had, the rebellious disobedience I manifested. Then I am cleansed anew so that I can begin every day with what is of primary value the sense of his presence with me and his power at work through me. That is what Jesus is talking about. This is where the Christian life begins truly to be lived -- when you have the presence of Jesus daily with you. But this did not apply to Judas. He had never been born again. Even though outwardly he was a disciple, inwardly he was not.

Jesus now comes to the second explanation of what was implied when he washed the feet of the disciples. This application is intensely practical.

**When he had washed their feet, and taken his garments, and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you know 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 as I have done to you. {John 13:12-15 RSV}**

Notice that Jesus introduces this by asking a question designed to make them think. "Do you know what I have done to you?" That is, "Have you thought this through? Do you know that this is more than a simple act of cleansing away the dirt from your feet? This is a symbol of something far more important and significant, not only of what I have done to you, but of what I want you to do to each other." What did he mean by the words, "I have given you an example"? An example of what? He had given an example of the true basis of authority! Where does influence, real authority come from? It comes from loving service!

Let us read what Luke says happened at this point:

**A dispute arose among them, which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For which is the greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves." {Luke 22:24-27 RSV}**

According to John, Jesus said, "You call me Teacher and Lord: and you are right." Not only was he that by the inherent majesty of his Person, not only had God made him that, the point he is making here is that the disciples had accepted that. They called him Teacher and Lord. They saw that he had authority, and followed him because of that. Why? Because he had served them! They voluntarily obeyed him because he had lovingly taken care of them, delivered them, comforted them, encouraged them, taught them, given himself to them, taken time to be with them, to serve them. Because of that they found themselves eager to follow him, willing to obey him, even when they could not understand him.

Luke reports his words, "It shall not be so among you," indicating his rejection of hierarchical authority in the church. Here in John, he says, "I have given you an example that you also should do as I have done to you."

This means two things:

One, it clearly means loving service to one another. As Paul puts it in Galatians, "By love, serve one another," {Gal 5:13}. This is to be true of all Christians, but especially those who are in positions of teaching and authority. Their authority, as leaders, will be directly related to their willingness to serve.

But, second, Jesus means we have a ministry to one another to help keep our spiritual feet clean. Thus, he says in Matthew 18: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone," {Matt 18:15 RSV}. Paul captures this thought in Galatians 6: "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness," {Gal 6:1 RSV}. And James adds, "Confess your sins one to another and pray for one another that you may be healed," {Jas 5:16 RSV}.

This great event in the Upper Room forms the basis for true church discipline and true leadership. This constitutes one of the greatest challenges the church faces today. We are called to demonstrate a different kind of authority, but what we've done is to import the world's view into the church. We have popes, bishops, superintendents, and many kinds of hierarchical structures. We give authority to the man at the top. Jesus never taught that. He taught instead that he who serves wins the hearts of others. They will obey him, calling him Teacher and Lord, because he loves them and serves them.

Note how he emphasizes the importance of this.

**Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them." {John 13:16-17 RSV}**

Notice the emphasis on "doing" here. It is not enough to teach it, to hold it as a mental principle, but to do it -- serving one another. How? Do something that someone needs done. Join the team that's going on a mission to Mexico. Read a book to some shut-in. "By love, serve one another."

This is where true authority arises.

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