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John 13:1-17 -- Supper Conversation: The Call To Servant Leadership

Once again, true to form, John supplies us with a different view of events than what the other Gospel writers had recorded. He is the only one to tell us about the incident of Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet at the last supper. The full impact of this can only be experienced by piecing together the conversation and events from the other accounts. It is also interesting that John chose not to make any mention of the symbolic covenant meal of wine and bread that came to be celebrated as the Eucharist. Even though this was recorded in the other accounts, we would expect that if it was supposed to have *the* significant, central place in church gatherings that it later received under Roman Catholicism, John would at least have made some reference to it. Instead, he is totally silent. The closest he came to making any comment that could have any bearing on the Eucharist was his recording of the Bread of Life discourse in chapter 6, which took place much earlier and in an entirely different context. Here Jesus did say, however, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh (His flesh in the context) profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are Spirit and are life" (6:64). Could it be that even by the end of the first century John could see that a "magical interpretation" of the Lord's supper was creeping into church gatherings? Was he (or the Holy Spirit) purposely attempting to bring corrective balance to this by recording this interpretative comment in Jn. 6, and the absolute silence in Jn. 13 about the institution of the Lord's supper?

Notes:

Vss. 1-3 - The setting was before the Judean Feast of the Passover, though we know that Jesus and His disciples were gathered here to eat their Passover meal (Lk. 22). Galileans observed the Passover a day earlier than Judean Jews. We are told that Judas has already determined to betray Jesus. John describes this course of action as something Satan had put into his heart. John mentions twice (for emphasis) that Jesus knew that He would soon be leaving this world to go to the Father (1,3). Furthermore, He was very much aware that "the Father had given all things into His hands", which meant that He was conscious of the authority and power that was His. John makes much of this so that we will not miss the dramatic contrast of the action He is now to undertake.

Vss. 4,5 - He changed out of His clothes, gird Himself in a towel, and began to wash the disciples' feet. This was a job that would have been done by the lowliest of servants, normally done when the guests first arrived. Apparently, when Peter and John (Lk. 22:8) had gone to prepare for the meal, this was overlooked. For whatever reason, their feet had not been washed since they had arrived. Jesus waited until after the meal began, to give them the opportunity to perform this service. The disciples, however, though all would have been aware that this courtesy had been left undone, were not willing to volunteer to serve one another in this fashion. When it was apparent that no one was going to care for the comfort of their compatriots, Jesus rose from the meal and performed this humble service. Once again, as He had done before in preparation for the Incarnation, "He emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant" (Phil. 2:7). His action was virtually incomprehensible, even shocking, to these men who had been steeped in their tightly structured hierarchical social structure. Those with power and prestige did not, and were not supposed to, do such tasks. In their minds, He was doing a very radical, demeaning thing, entirely inappropriate for an important rabbi to "lower Himself" to do.

Vss. 6-11 - At first, Peter objects to Jesus' action. *Never shall you wash my feet!* -- Peter refused to be the cause of Jesus' indignity. *If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me* -- Jesus tells Peter that his refusal is to shut Jesus out of his life. *Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.* -- Peter, in his characteristic zeal for Jesus, wants to be bathed all over, if that is what it takes to share in Jesus' fellowship. *He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.* -- Appealing to their life experience, Jesus points out that one who has bathed gets his feet dirty walking about the dusty streets in sandals, though the rest of his body stays clean. Those who are clean only need a little "touching up", to renew their purity (cf. Jas. 1:27; I Jn. 1:9). They as a group were clean by virtue of their faith in Him (15:3). *but not all of you* -- John explains this comment for us in the next verse. Jesus was referring to His betrayer, Judas Iscariot.

Vss. 12-17 - Jesus returns to His place at the table, and begins to explain the meaning of His actions. *You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am.* -- Jesus acknowledges that He is the one they look to for instruction and direction. These were titles of great authority and respect among the people. "Teacher" would have been the equivalent of the Aramaic word "rabbi", which literally means "great one" (1:38,49; 3:2; 20:16). A rabbi was held in high esteem in Israel in those days. It was customary to sit at his feet, ...in deference, not just for practicality..., and to walk behind him, not alongside him. He carried a great deal of authority and respect. The very essence of the title, "Lord", was authority and prestige. Those who had such a title were the powerful, privileged, and respected. *If I, then, the Lord and the Teacher washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you should also do as I did to you.* -- Jesus modeled authority and power that did not exempt people from service, rather it was good and fitting for even the most prestigious and powerful to perform the humblest and simplest task to care for the comfort and well being of others.

At this point, it would be valuable to look at what Luke records of the conversation of that evening. In chapter 22, verses 24-27 he writes, "And there arose also a dispute among them as to which of them was regarded to be the greatest. And He said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it (verbal form of the same word "Lord" as in Jn. 13) over them, and those who have authority over them are called (or "call themselves") "Benefactors". But not so with you, but let him who is the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as the servant. For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.'" Luke records this immediately after describing the last supper, though the structure of the Greek would allow it to be another comment of what had happened *during* the supper. John chose to expand on this incident in his Gospel account. It would be not uncharacteristic of Jesus that, as this dispute was unfolding, He would quietly have gotten up from the table, changed into the servant-garb, and began washing the disciples' feet. His actions would have been conspicuous enough to cause the argument to stop while they try to understand what He is doing. In the end, His explanation of His actions would have more powerfully confronted their foolish posturing and competition. Incidentally, the phrase, "as the youngest", meant to be teachable and to act as though one did *not* have a higher place of prestige or authority. In Eastern society, age was honored, often being equated with wisdom. Unfortunately, sometimes those who were older would tend to "pull rank", insisting that their opinions be heard and accepted without question, because they had the accumulated wisdom and experience to know best. Their tendency to "puff themselves up" in this way would shut down healthy inquiry and debate (e.g., Job 15:1-10; cf. Job 32:4-10). Usually, this meant that the status quo of power and prestige would be maintained, but the discovery of truth or real wisdom would suffer.

The last supper was not the first time that Jesus had spoken to them in this fashion. Just a little over a week earlier, on their way to Jerusalem for this very feast, James and John had been seeking special status among the disciples, asking that they could sit next to Him, one on either side, in His coming glory. Jesus put them off by saying that this was not His to give. The other disciples, however, overheard this conversation and were upset with the two brothers. Jesus gathered them all together and said, "You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them (lit., "lord it down upon them"); and their great men exercise authority over them (lit., "exercise authority down upon them"). But it is not so among you (lit., "but not as this is it among you"), but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mk. 10:42-45). Jesus described the hierarchical, top-down system of the world and forbade them from operating that way. He said that those in His kingdom who had power or greatness were to employ it in serving others and building them up. Power in the kingdom of God is not to be accumulated for prestige, or used to control people. Rather, it is to be freely given away. It is to be used to liberate people from bondage and to set them free. Jesus pointed to His own life as the prime example of this healthy use of power.

Vs. 16 - *Truly, truly I say to you* -- Important proclamation coming. *a slave is not greater than his master; neither is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him* -- If Jesus, the Master, has come to be a servant, then the apostles should not expect to be served. They, like Him, are to be leaders at serving others.

Vs. 17 - If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them -- It is not enough to mentally understand this concept. Happiness will come to those who actually get involved in serving others (cf. Acts 20:35).