

T. Austin-Sparks:

READING: John 13:1-17; Leviticus 8:24; Exodus 30:18-21; Romans 6:4, 8:1,2,4; 1 Corinthians 3:3; Ephesians 4:1,2, 5:2; 1 John 2:6.

There are several preliminary observations to be made in approaching the message in John 13.

Firstly, the end of John chapter 12 sees the close of the Lord's public ministry. From then onward, He is with His own; and so it is with them that we find Him when we come to chapter 13.

Secondly, chapters 11 and 12 having brought right to the fore the whole matter of death and resurrection, as seen in Lazarus and the grain of wheat, chapter 13 indicates what is to obtain on resurrection and ascension ground, because everything is being dealt with here and onward from that standpoint - Christ risen and returning to the Father (vs. 1).

Thirdly, everything is now inward and not outward. So far, it has all been objective; every incident through all these chapters has been in an outward way. From now on it is inward, it is subjective.

Fourthly, it is no longer only individual; it is now corporate.

These four things must be recognized in order to arrive at the full meaning and value of what follows. Thus it is a matter of what the Church is in itself, as on resurrection and ascension ground, for it is the Church which is now represented. Judas is going; Christ is being left alone with those who are to be the nucleus of the Church, and it all becomes a matter of what the Church is in itself, as viewed from the standpoint of Christ's resurrection and ascension, and its union with Him.

He is about to depart out of the world. All things have been given into His hands, and He is seeking to secure the inward ground which will lead to the fulfillment of the Church's one comprehensive purpose - the continuation of Himself in representation on this earth, the expression of Himself here. He is going, but He is seeking to secure the continuity, the continuation, of Himself here as in His Church. And so, about to depart, He says that He leaves them an example, and when we come to analyze the example, we find that it is something which reaches right down into the innermost motives of the heart - Christ cannot be followed in just an outward way; that is proved. He has to be followed in an inward way.

So, having laid that foundation, we can come to the inclusive message of chapter 13.

The Immense Importance and Power of Meekness

That which arises is the immense importance and power of meekness. Perhaps it has not been sufficiently recognized that the fulfillment by the Church of its great vocation rests and depends upon its meekness. It has a tremendous business on hand, and it has immense forces against it. There is no doubt that the calling of the Church is a very great thing indeed, fraught with unspeakably great issues, and opposed by terrific forces; and to meet all that - the purpose, the vocation, and all the forces of evil - the one basic essential is meekness: because, in the first place, before the Church can get on with its work here in this world it must be in a position where Satan has no ground. Resurrection and ascension imply that; they just carry that with them. Resurrection and ascension mean that the entire ground of Satan has been set aside. The Lord Jesus has gone up on high because He has triumphed. So I repeat that resurrection and ascension just imply that Satan's power and authority have been destroyed and all things are in Christ's hands, not Satan's.

Meekness Destroys the Ground of Satan's Authority

The Church must come on to that ground, and we find so impressively - and it is most impressive - that the very first thing introduced on that ground is perhaps the last thing that we would have thought we should meet. When we come on to resurrection and ascension ground, on to the ground of Christ's great triumph and exaltation, we meet meekness, and meekness means that Satan's ground is destroyed, for Satan's fall was due to pride being found in his heart, and man's fall was because he let in that same pride. Pride - to have everything in himself, to be as God, to be himself the seat of knowledge. "Ye shall be as God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). Wherever there is pride, Satan has the ground that he wants for destroying and wrecking, and the risen Lord is providing ground against that by this tremendous object-lesson as to meekness. Yes, Satan, sinister, powerful and terrible as he is, can often be completely nullified by a spirit of meekness, his

whole ground can be taken from him by a spirit of meekness. The importance and power of meekness is seen, then, firstly in that it destroys the very ground of Satan's authority.

Meekness the Great Unifying Factor

Then it is seen as the great unifying factor. Judas, the disintegrating factor, has been compelled to withdraw. Satan is going to do his utmost to scatter, divide and disintegrate this band. In view of all that, the Lord, by His example, His acted sermon, is saying, "For the unifying of the Church, the integrating of the Church, the establishing of the Church as something which cannot be broken up or divided spiritually, the one essential is meekness." "I beseech you to walk worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called, with all lowliness and meekness" (Eph. 4:1,2). The message to the Church at Philippi was because of disunity, and the Lord's meekness in self-emptying and humiliation and bond-servant form, His great condescension, is introduced by the Apostle as the ground of the Church's salvation at Philippi. The unifying factor is meekness. "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5).

If we did but know it, a very great deal of the strain that is known by the Lord's people collectively, the postponement of full blessing, the delay in fulfillment of essential purpose, the distress and the heartbreak and the bewilderment, is due to secret pride. The Lord sees it - unwillingness to let go somewhere, unwillingness to acknowledge somewhere, unwillingness to come down from some position taken as to our rightness. Yes, there is a lot of painful history of that kind, if we did but know it; it can be traced to pride, hidden pride; and the Lord says that the counter to that - to all that delay and postponement, to that arrest, to that threat of the complete disintegration of the Lord's people - is meekness. If that is true, we are right in saying that it is of immense importance and power. None would say that, during the three years with the Master, the Twelve, or even the Eleven, were a unity, and so much was due to rivalry, jealousy, personal interests. These are features of pride.

Meekness the Hallmark of Love

But then there is another thing which comes out here. It is that meekness is the hallmark of love. You know that John's Gospel can be divided into three sections, under three words - Life, Light and Love, and the love section begins at verse 34 of the thirteenth chapter. "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; even as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." But meekness is the hallmark of love. Pride and love can never go together. Love and meekness will always be found together if the love is genuine. If the example is to be taken account of - if the Lord Jesus is the great example of love - the argument is just overwhelming. "Having loved his own that were in the world, he loved them unto the end [or: unto the uttermost].... And... he took a towel" (vs. 1,13).

He loved; we have no doubt about His love, and that He is the supreme example of love. He is equally the supreme example of meekness. These two go together. "What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt understand hereafter." What an afterward! This Gospel is being written in the afterward. How does it begin? "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and THE WORD WAS GOD. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him; and without him was not anything made that hath been made." "And he took a towel, and girded himself."

These disciples really had not grasped the magnitude of the Person who was in their midst. From time to time it came home to them with some force, and they felt that He was more than man. But it had not yet come home to them in fullness who He was, and it never did until after His resurrection and ascension. When, forty days after His resurrection, He was received up into heaven, and the mighty Holy Spirit came forth into them, then, and then only - but then - they knew in fullness who He was. It overwhelmed them.

And then they had a retrospective contemplation. "God, very God, who made all things, the Creator of the universe, has been down here and washed our feet!" That is tremendous, is it not? They knew afterward what had happened, they knew afterward the greatness of the condescension of God in the Person of Jesus Christ, and that did have an effect; it was a mighty power in their lives. They may not see eye to eye on all matters. The work in them was not immediately perfected, so that they were in perfect agreement in all interpretations. Peter and Paul may represent different standpoints, and at one time they may clash. Ah, but there is something deeper than that. Peter will say: "our beloved brother Paul also, according to the wisdom given to him, wrote unto you" (2 Pet. 3:15). Something deep down has been wrought, and you find them very meek men, and, by their meekness, pillars of the Church. It is significant that when Paul wrote to the Corinthians, dealing with divisions, he said: "The trouble is with your feet" - "ye... walk after the manner of men" (1 Cor. 3:3). John says, "You must walk as He walked": "he that saith he abideth in him ought himself also to walk even as he walked"

(1 John 2:6); not walk as men. It is all here symbolized in the feet being cleansed.

The Walk of the Believer

We can pass now from that to the next thing. The Church's walk in this world is the link. We have read all those passages about the feet and the walk. We are able to see what a large place the walk has in the spiritual life. The Lord Jesus says something very strong about this. "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me"; "that depends upon your walk, upon your feet." What does He mean? Well, after all, this washing of feet was the neutralizing of the "earth touch," the contact with the earth - that which lies under the curse, which God can never accept, that which is completely contrary to God's mind. We have to be here, we have to walk here; but we have to have a great sensitiveness to the dust, a great sensitiveness to dirt.

Some people can bear a lot of dirt without being bothered by it! They are not very sensitive in this matter, and so they are not found washing very much. There are other people who are very sensitive to the slightest touch of dirt, because they know the danger of contamination. The surgeon is extremely sensitive to dirt; you will constantly see him laboriously "washing up." The ordinary person would ask whether all this is quite necessary: is this not overdoing it a bit? There he stands; he goes on scrubbing and washing, rinsing and washing again and scrubbing. But he knows the infinite peril of dirt, of contact with a world that is impregnated with dangerous elements, with another life that is harmful; and he is sensitive to that. The Lord Jesus was extremely sensitive, and He must have suffered terribly, walking, in His sinlessness, on this earth. Here in this chapter He is only saying in a pictorial way, "You must have a great sensitiveness to the death touch, to the earth touch."

That will work out in many ways. It will work out as to our conversation. If you and I are really spiritual, really growing in the spiritual life, we shall have violent reactions to our own talk. It will touch us, too, in what we read. It will touch us in all sorts of ways. The point is that there has to be sensitiveness to that which belongs to the realm on the other side of that Cross, the realm to which we are supposed to have died, and which has nothing in common with this realm of "walking in newness of life"; yes, a growing sensitiveness, that means pain when there is anything present which the Lord does not accept or agree with. If the Church is going to fulfill its vocation, if the Church is going to be here with the impact of the risen, ascended Lord, it has to be very, very sensitive to what is against the Spirit. And, of course, this has to be true of the individuals who make up the Church.

We have, therefore, little difficulty in seeing why the Church has so little influence and power and effect. It has become so contaminated, and it has lost its sensitiveness to spiritual things. It can allow so much that, from God's standpoint, was put out when the Lord Jesus died. Go back to Aaron and his sons, the priests, and the laver between the altar and the tabernacle, the tent of meeting. "Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet thereat... THAT THEY DIE NOT" (Ex. 30:19). They have to get rid of the death touch - of the earth touch which is the death touch. So the blood was placed on the great toe of the right foot, indicating the whole walk of the servants of God. I think it is unnecessary for us to go further than that. I only call you back to that selection of passages at the head of this chapter, and there are many more about the walk of the believer.

And there is that great inclusive word to the Colossians: "If then ye were raised together with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated on the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things that are above, not on the things that are upon the earth. For ye died, and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:1-3). There is the great divide of the Cross between earth and heaven. Union with the risen, ascended Lord does mean that there is set up inside the believer, and inside the Church when it is according to the Lord's mind, a faculty for discerning and perceiving what is and what is not of the Lord; what belongs to this new realm and what does not belong to it; and the development of that faculty is the way of the Church's increasing spiritual life and power, as it is of the individual's.

The Washing of One Another's Feet

Then, finally, as to this matter of feet-washing. "Ye also ought to wash one another's feet." We do not take this literally; we know that the whole thing here is symbolical. But there it is something that we ought to do. "We also ought to wash one another's feet." What does it mean?

It is a picture again. "Brethren... if a man be overtaken in any trespass, ye which are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of meekness; looking to thyself, lest thou also be tempted" (Gal. 6:1). It is the spirit of meekness helping the one who has become touched, tainted, or overtaken in the way. This one is in the way, and there creeps up something to corrupt or pollute, and overtakes him; his feet are caught. Now, "ye which are

spiritual," wash his feet, help him out of that, help him to get free. I think we more often point out the dirt than wash it off. We are far more ready to criticize our brother for his fault or faults than to set ourselves to help him to get rid of them. Washing of the feet surely does just mean making it our humble business, in all lowliness and meekness, knowing our own frailty and weakness, to help to remove that which we see as a defect, a fault, a wrong, an evil, in our brother.

Well, that covers a lot of ground, and I am not going to stay longer with this matter of feet-washing, but it is something that the Lord has said is to be a ministry in the Church, if the Church is to be kept in purity; something that we have to do. It is what Paul calls "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15) - in love being faithful with one another. That is feet-washing. It may sometimes be hot water, it may sometimes need a little caustic - but the balm of love must be there.

Have we established our statement as to the immense importance and power of meekness? If I were to go back and underline anything that has been said, I think I should underline mainly that part about spiritual sensitiveness to the touch of that which has in it the power of death and disintegration. It comes so subtly, just a suggestion. We have only to hint at something about a fellow-believer, about another Christian, and it becomes something which works and grows. The enemy just looks for the slightest thing like that, to build it up, and before long that which was only a hint or a suggestion about them has involved their whole life in a black cloud, and they become suspect and wholly unclean, and you begin to avoid them. It is only one of the many ways in which you and I are called upon to be sensitive to dust, to dirt. We are moving in a very unclean world, naturally and spiritually. It is so easy for us to be affected, and we must have this sensitiveness to dirt to get rid of it in order to maintain a healthy living body.

One of the books which perhaps has, by way of illustration, helped me most in this whole realm of spiritual sensitiveness, is *The Life of Lord Lister*. It is the story of the man who was largely responsible for that whole science of antiseptics, the great warfare against the deadly microbe. What a story it is! And the story opens with the battle that he had to wage, and what a battle was waged against him! You could hardly imagine a surgeon coming in to perform a major operation in an old dirty coat that he had been wearing doing all sorts of other things, then going from that operation, with all its blood on him, to perform another one, and so on. We are not surprised that the hospitals themselves were scenes of more mortality than the outside world. What a battle! His whole theory was laughed at, scorned, ridiculed. He had to fight this battle through, but it was won.

We know today the importance of washing. The Lord Jesus knew all about it; they did not know. This greater than Lister knew all about that counterpart, that antitype, of contamination, when He, coming into a universe impregnated with these evil germs working death and havoc, said, "We must wash up before we touch anything." So He said to the Church, as the first thing upon a resurrection-ascension basis: "Let us get down to wash the point of contact with this world, and break that contact, get clean and clear of it." Our whole vocation and testimony hangs upon that.