

Homiletics Analysis: John 13

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

John 13 opens the “Book of Glory” (chapters 13–21), marking a dramatic pivot from Jesus’ public ministry to His private discourse with the Twelve on the night of His betrayal. The chapter falls into three movements: the foot-washing (vv. 1–17), the identification and departure of the betrayer (vv. 18–30), and the new commandment discourse with Peter’s denial predicted (vv. 31–38). The chapter opens with one of the most theologically freighted sentences in the Gospel: Jesus, knowing that His hour had come, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and knowing that He had come from God and was going to God — *stooped and washed feet*. The sovereignty and the servanthood are held together from the first verse. Judas is identified through the morsel, departs into the night, and the chapter turns immediately to the glorification of the Son of Man. Jesus then issues the new commandment: love one another as I have loved you — with the foot-washing as its defining illustration — and predicts that Peter, who insists he will lay down his life, will deny Him three times before dawn.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to accomplish two inseparable things through this passage: first, to redefine greatness, love, and discipleship in the light of the cross by demonstrating them in the foot-washing and commanding their replication; and second, to anchor the identity and security of the disciples not in their own resolve (Peter’s boast is undercut immediately) but in Jesus’ sovereign, knowing, cross-directed love. The disciples are being prepared to love one another — and to survive — not on the basis of their moral capacity but on the basis of what Jesus has done for them. The chapter intends to produce both humility of posture and confidence of belonging in those who read it.

Subject Sentence: Jesus washes feet, gives the new commandment, and unmasks both betrayal and denial — redefining love on the eve of the cross.

Primary Claim: On the night of His betrayal, Jesus — knowing everything — chose to serve, to love, and to give, establishing the pattern and the power of Christian community; the disciples’ call is not to exceed His example by strength but to extend it by grace.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Foot-Washing as Sacrament (Roman Catholic / Some Anglican Traditions)

A persistent interpretive tradition — particularly in Roman Catholic and some high-church Anglican readings — treats the foot-washing as instituting a liturgical ordinance coordinate with or supplementary to baptism. In some readings, verse 8 (“If I do not wash you, you have no share with me”) is taken to indicate a sacramental necessity: without the rite of foot-washing, one lacks participation in Christ. This reading must be *refuted* on exegetical grounds. The text itself resists sacramentalization at two levels. First, Jesus explicitly bifurcates the washing in vv. 9–10: the one who has bathed (*leloumenos*) does not need to wash except for his feet — distinguishing a prior, total cleansing from the present, partial one. Most commentators rightly read the full bathing as referencing regenerative cleansing (likely baptism or the whole work of justification) and the foot-washing as the ongoing cleansing of fellowship disrupted by sin. Second, the interpretive key Jesus himself provides in vv. 12–17 is explicitly *ethical and exemplary*, not sacramental: “I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.” The lesson Jesus draws is about humble service, not about repeating a rite. The Johannine context (cf. John 15:3 — “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you”) further confirms that cleansing in John is word-and-Spirit-accomplished, not ritual-accomplished.

The New Commandment as Exclusively Intra-Community (Some Narrow Readings)

Some readings — occasionally found in Reformed ecclesiology when pressed in a certain direction, and more commonly in certain Baptist and sectarian traditions — restrict the new commandment’s scope so tightly to the gathered church that the love-neighbor-as-self of the Synoptics is treated as a separate and superseded command. This reading *qualifies* but ultimately overreaches. The “one another” (*allēlous*) in v. 34 is genuinely focused on the community of disciples — Jesus is shaping the character of *this* community, for *these* people, in *this* moment. The missional motivation in v. 35 (“by this all people will know that you are my disciples”) confirms the inward-facing direction: this is the quality of love that makes the community visible and distinct. However, to treat this as a replacement of the neighbor-love command rather than its most concentrated expression misreads the Johannine and canonical whole. The new commandment is “new” not in replacing love but in calibrating its measure: *as I have loved you* — the cross-shaped, foot-washing form of love — is the new standard. The scope is ecclesial; the principle extends.

The Glorification Language (vv. 31–32) — Premature or Proleptic?

A minority of interpreters, particularly those emphasizing realized eschatology in John, read the glorification language of vv. 31–32 as already complete at Judas’ departure — as if the cross is, in John’s theology, already fully accomplished. This reading rightly captures John’s consistent *proleptic* idiom (the cross *is* the glorification, not merely the precursor to it) but *qualifies* if taken to mean the cross is now behind the chapter’s theology. The aorist *edoxasthē* (“was glorified”) in v. 31 is best read as proleptic or ingressive — the departure of Judas has set in motion an irreversible sequence that is as good as done. This is

consistent with John's high Christology throughout. The Reformed reading affirms the cross as simultaneously the moment of deepest humiliation and highest glorification — not a contradiction to resolve but a paradox to preach.

The Reformed Reading

The text is best read as follows: the foot-washing is an acted parable of the cross, not a sacramental rite; it illustrates and enacts the humility-unto-death that Jesus is about to accomplish. Peter's resistance (v. 8) is the natural human resistance to grace — to the idea that Jesus must do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Jesus' rebuke ("If I do not wash you, you have no share with me") is not a sacramental threat but a gospel claim: *you must receive grace, not perform it, in order to belong*. The new commandment is the ethical application of what the cross accomplishes — love one another *as I have loved you* is the community formed by the gospel, not the community earning it. Peter's denial prediction seals the point: the disciples' security does not rest on their loyalty; it rests on Jesus' knowing, sovereign love exercised toward them before they failed.

Key Canonical Support

- **Isaiah 52:13–53:12** — The Servant who is exalted precisely through humiliation and suffering; John 13's foot-washing is the enacted anticipation of the Suffering Servant's pattern, with glory achieved through the downward path.
 - **Mark 10:42–45** — "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant... the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." The Synoptic pronouncement receives its most dramatic enacted illustration in John 13.
 - **Philippians 2:5–11** — The *kenosis* passage: Christ, who had equality with God, took the form of a servant. Paul's ethical appeal to the Philippians ("have this mind among yourselves") is the epistolary equivalent of Jesus' command in John 13:15 — "I have given you an example."
 - **1 John 3:16–18** — "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." This passage is John's own canonical commentary on John 13:34–35 — the community shaped by the cross-shaped love of the foot-washing.
 - **Romans 5:6–8** — "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." The sovereign, initiative-taking, knowing love of John 13:1–3 — Jesus acting in full knowledge of what was about to happen — finds its doctrinal exposition here: the love that goes first, uninvited, toward those who cannot repay it.
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Aim: To demonstrate that Jesus’ foot-washing and new commandment are not moral challenges to exceed but gospel patterns to inhabit — producing in the reader both humility before grace and courage in community.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Transitional declaration: Jesus’ “hour” has come; He loved His own “to the end”	<i>eis telos</i> — “to the end/to the uttermost”; sets the theological frame for the whole chapter
2–3	Setting: supper, devil already at work in Judas; Jesus’ self-awareness stated — from God, to God, all authority given	The sovereignty frame is explicit before the servant act
4–5	Jesus rises, lays aside outer garments, wraps a towel, begins washing the disciples’ feet	The acted parable; outer garments <i>laid aside</i> may echo John 10:17–18 (laying down his life)
6–8	Peter protests; Jesus states the necessity — “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me”	Peter’s resistance = natural human resistance to grace received rather than performed
9–11	Peter overreacts (wash all of me); Jesus distinguishes bathed (<i>leloumenos</i>) from foot-washing; “not all of you are clean” — reference to Judas	Two-level washing: regeneration vs. fellowship restoration
12–17	Jesus explains the example: if He — Lord and Teacher — has washed their feet, they ought to wash one another’s feet; “a servant is not greater than his master”	The ethical application drawn <i>by Jesus himself</i> — exemplary, not sacramental
18–19	Jesus distinguishes whom He chose; Psalm 41:9 cited — betrayal foretold; “that you may believe that I am he”	Sovereign foreknowledge of betrayal does not negate the love

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
20	Whoever receives the one Jesus sends receives Jesus; whoever receives Jesus receives the Father	Apostolic authority grounded in the sending chain
21–22	Jesus is “troubled in his spirit” and announces a betrayer; disciples look at one another, uncertain	Jesus’ anguish is real — the sovereignty does not make the betrayal painless
23–26	The Beloved Disciple asks; Jesus identifies Judas by giving him the morsel	The morsel of hospitality becomes the moment of identification and final hardening
27–30	Satan enters Judas; Jesus commands him to act quickly; Judas departs; “it was night”	“It was night” — Johannine darkness/light symbolism; the darkness goes out
31–32	“Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him” — glorification language	Proleptic aorist; the cross is the moment of glorification, not merely its prelude
33	Jesus addresses the disciples as “little children” — He is leaving; they cannot follow now	Term of tender pastoral address used only here in the Gospel
34–35	The new commandment: love one another as I have loved you; by this all will know you are my disciples	<i>Kainos</i> — new in kind, not merely in novelty; the standard is now “as I have loved you”
36–38	Peter asks where Jesus is going; insists he will lay down his life; Jesus predicts the three denials before the rooster crows	Peter’s confidence is real but misplaced — the security of the disciples is not in Peter’s resolve

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–5	The Sovereign Who Stoops: Jesus Washes Feet

Division	Verses	Label
2	6–11	The Grace That Must Be Received: Peter’s Protest and Jesus’ Answer
3	12–17	The Pattern That Must Be Extended: Jesus Explains the Example
4	18–30	The Betrayer Identified and Departed: Judas Goes Into the Night
5	31–35	The Glory and the Commandment: Love One Another as I Have Loved You
6	36–38	The Denial Predicted: Peter’s Confidence and Its Undoing

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Jesus washes feet, gives the new commandment, and unmask both betrayal and denial — redefining love on the eve of the cross.

Primary Claim: On the night of His betrayal, Jesus — knowing everything — chose to serve, to love, and to give, establishing the pattern and the power of Christian community; the disciples’ call is not to exceed His example by strength but to extend it by grace.

Applications (Five)

1. Receive grace before you render it. (*Mind/Belief*) Peter’s instinct — “You shall never wash my feet” — is the instinct of every person who believes that belonging to Jesus is something they maintain by their own dignity and effort. But Jesus is unambiguous: “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” The foot-washing is not merely an act of humility for Jesus to model; it is an act of grace for Peter to receive. Before the Christian community can practice servant-love, every member of it must have knelt and let Jesus wash their feet — which means accepting that you come to Christ as someone who needs washing, not someone who assists in the washing. The person who has not received grace cannot give it; they can only manage it, and managed grace is not grace at all.

2. Let the cross calibrate your definition of love. (*Affections/Worship*) The commandment is new not because love is new but because the measure is: *as I have loved you*. The community of disciples is being called to love one another with a cross-shaped,

floor-level, towel-in-hand love — not a warm feeling, not a polite tolerance, not a reciprocal arrangement. Sit with what Jesus knew when He washed feet: He knew Judas would betray Him (v. 11), He knew Peter would deny Him (v. 38), He knew they would all scatter. And He washed their feet anyway. The love the new commandment calls for is not love extended to the lovable but love extended from the inexhaustible — love that flows from having been loved first, not from finding others worthy. Confess where your love has been conditional. Ask for the love of Christ to be the source of yours, not the standard you are failing.

3. Serve in the community God has given you, at the level of actual need. (*Will/Behavior*)

Jesus did not theorize about servant-leadership; He found the dirtiest, most demeaning task available and did it. The new commandment is not a sentiment — it is feet and water and a towel. For the reader or hearer, this means identifying the specific, concrete needs of the brothers and sisters in their actual community — not the community they wish they had, not a distant mission field, but the people in the room — and acting. Who in your congregation needs someone to show up? Who needs a meal, a visit, a difficult conversation, a financial gift, a practical act that costs you something? The foot-washing is not a metaphor to admire; it is a pattern to replicate in whatever the equivalent of foot-washing is in your specific community this week.

4. Trust that Jesus knows and loves you even in your worst moments.

(*Affections/Worship*) The frame of John 13 is deliberate: Jesus acts in full knowledge. He knew Judas would betray Him. He knew Peter would deny Him. He knew what was coming. And He washed their feet. The implication for the disciple reading this text is direct: Jesus knows your worst — your denials, your betrayals, your moments of cowardice and self-protection — and He acts toward you in love anyway. The security of the believer is not grounded in the believer's consistency; it is grounded in Jesus' knowing, sovereign, cross-directed love. Peter's confidence ("I will lay down my life for you") was misplaced confidence. But Jesus did not abandon Peter for having it. Let your confidence be placed not in your resolve but in His — the One who, knowing everything, loved to the uttermost.

5. Examine whether your community is recognizably marked by cross-shaped love.

(*Mind/Belief*) Jesus anchors the new commandment to a missional claim: "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (v. 35). This is not merely an ethical aspiration but a diagnostic. The love of the Christian community is supposed to be observable, distinctive, and legible to outsiders as belonging to Jesus. The question for any congregation or small group is concrete: Is what we have together actually recognizable as something different from what civic groups, workplaces, and neighborhoods produce? If someone spent a month watching how this community treats its own members — especially in conflict, difficulty, failure, and need — would they conclude that something supernaturally different is happening here? If the honest answer is no, the remedy is not a program; it is a return to the foot-washing — receiving grace again, and letting it produce what it is designed to produce.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: John 13 is one of Scripture's most concentrated displays of the unity of Christ's person, sovereignty, and saving action. The theological freight of verses 1–3 is extraordinary: Jesus acts in full knowledge of His divine origin and destination, in full awareness of the betrayal in the room, and in full possession of all authority — and this is the precise moment He chooses to wash feet. This is not humility despite sovereignty; it is humility *as the exercise* of sovereignty. The passage teaches that God's power is not expressed in coercion and conquest but in self-giving descent — the One from whom all authority derives uses that authority to serve. The new commandment (vv. 34–35) then establishes that this cross-shaped love is not an isolated divine performance but the constitutive pattern of the covenant community: the people formed by the gospel are to be identifiable by it. The prediction of both Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial within the same chapter frames the entire passage in sovereign grace — Jesus acts toward His own in love before they fail, knowing they will fail, sustaining the relationship not on the basis of their loyalty but on the basis of His.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: John 13 is a sustained enacted argument for the priority of grace — and therefore a foundational Reformed text. The foot-washing is not merely a moral example (though it is that); it is first an act of grace that must be received before it can be replicated. Jesus' rebuke of Peter — "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me" — is functionally a statement about the order of salvation: union with Christ requires receiving what He does for us, not doing something for Him first. The Reformed doctrines of sovereign grace and unconditional love find their narrative embodiment here: Jesus loves *in spite of* what He knows, which means the love is not contingent on the disciples' performance. The new commandment then flows from this as sanctification always flows from justification in Reformed theology — not as a means of belonging but as the fruit of it, the community-expression of what the cross has already accomplished. The prediction of Peter's denial further confirms that the disciples' standing does not rest on their faithfulness; it rests on Christ's — a point Paul will draw out doctrinally in Romans 5 and 8, and that Jesus here demonstrates pastorally on the night He was betrayed.

Main Takeaway

Jesus washed feet on the night He was betrayed, knowing everything — knowing Judas would sell Him, knowing Peter would deny Him, knowing the cross was hours away — and He did it anyway, and called it love. That is the measure you are now invited to use: not love when it is easy, not love when it is returned, not love when you feel adequate to it, but love

as He loved — from the floor, with the towel, toward the ones who will fail you. And the only way to love like that is to have first knelt and let Him wash you. You have no share in this without that. Receive it. Then give it.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the foot-washing to a moral example without its gospel foundation.** The single most common homiletical failure with John 13 is to preach the foot-washing as a challenge to be humble, as if the passage's main point is "leaders should serve." This produces a sermon that could be preached at a corporate leadership retreat with no reference to the gospel whatsoever. The foot-washing is first an act of grace that must be received (the Peter exchange is the interpretive key Jesus provides) before it is a pattern to replicate. Preach the reception before the replication.
- **Ignoring the sovereign frame of verses 1–3.** The passage goes out of its way to state that Jesus acts in full knowledge — of His authority, His origin, His destination, and the betrayal in the room. This frame is not decorative; it is the theological anchor. A Jesus who washes feet because He is unaware of what is coming is a very different Jesus than the one John presents. The sovereignty makes the servanthood more astonishing, not less. Do not begin the sermon at verse 4 (the action) without the frame of verses 1–3 (the knowing).
- **Treating the two-level washing (vv. 9–11) as irrelevant detail.** The distinction between *leloumenos* (the one fully bathed) and the foot-washing is a significant theological clue that John embeds in Jesus' own words. Glossing past it leaves the passage vulnerable to sacramentalization (on one side) or to a flat, merely-exemplary reading (on the other). The two-level washing points to two realities: the once-for-all cleansing of justification/regeneration and the ongoing cleansing of fellowship. Both are real; neither is the same as the other. This distinction is worth naming from the pulpit.
- **Preaching the new commandment without the cross-shaped standard.** John 13:34 is sometimes cited as if "love one another" were the novel content of the commandment, when in fact the novelty is the standard: *as I have loved you*. To preach this commandment without anchoring it to the foot-washing scene just completed — and to the cross that scene anticipates — is to reduce it to a generic ethic of niceness. The measure of the commandment is not warmth of feeling but the willingness to serve, stoop, and give at cost to oneself, as He did.
- **Missing the irony and pastoral weight of Judas and Peter in the same chapter.** The chapter contains two kinds of failure: the betrayer who goes into the night, and the denier who insists he won't. The preacher who deals only with Judas has missed Peter; the one who deals only with Peter has missed the darkness of Judas'.

departure. John places them in the same chapter deliberately. The result is a passage that speaks both to catastrophic, willful departure from Christ and to confident, well-intentioned failure — and frames both against the backdrop of Jesus' knowing, foot-washing love. Both failure modes are present in any congregation.

- **Failing to ground Peter's denial prediction in the passage's security motif.**
Peter's denial is often preached as a warning against overconfidence — and it is that. But the preacher who ends there has missed the deeper pastoral point: Jesus announces the denial without abandoning Peter. He does not say “You will deny me, therefore you are no longer mine.” He predicts it, and He prays for Peter (Luke 22:32 confirms what John implies), and He restores Peter (John 21). The prediction is not a condemnation; it is a sovereign foreknowledge held within covenant love. The security of the disciples is not in Peter's promise; it is in Jesus' — “I have given you an example” and “I have loved you to the uttermost.” End the sermon there, not merely with the crowing of the rooster.