

DOWN FROM HIS GLORY

SERIES: THE UPPER ROOM DISCOURSE

By Danny Hall

At our house we are big-time Tolkien fans, so we couldn't wait to see the movie *The Lord of the Rings, Part One: The Fellowship of the Ring* (1). The day our son Christopher got home from his first quarter at college, we all headed for the theater to watch the premier together, and it was great.

The basic premise of the story is that there is a ring of power, forged by the dark Lord Sauron, that is designed to control a number of other rings of power that have been dispersed throughout Middle Earth. It gives the bearer the possibility of ultimately controlling the destiny of all Middle Earth. Lord Sauron has lost the ring in battle, and now it has finally turned up. So of course he wants it back so he can once again wield his evil influence.

The seductiveness of the power represented by that ring is a recurring theme in the story. Even noble characters begin to believe that if they had the ring, they could wield its power nobly. So throughout, the temptation continually arises for one character after another to get the ring of power into their possession.

That is a great picture of the way you and I think about influence and authority and power. Although we can list numerous examples of how we have seen power abused, and have perhaps ourselves been objects of the abuse of power, somewhere deep inside there is a little bit of pride that says, "When I have power, I will wield it nobly." That is obviously a deception, but it raises the question, what would a noble exercise of power or authority look like?

That is what we're going to see in John 13, our text for this message. In this passage God has been opening up my heart and mind to wonderful things about what it means to have true servant leadership in the New-Covenant era, the time of the Spirit-led kingdom of God and the building of his church. In John 13 Jesus demonstrates, through observable acts and explanations, what it means to be a person of authority and power in the right way, in order to confront and prepare the disciples for their task.

In John 13-17, the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus is preparing the disciples for two realities that are imminent. The first is that he is no longer going to be with them. For more than three years he has walked with them, taught them, forgiven them, encouraged them, rebuked them, trained them, and given them the opportunity to observe his life. But now that time is coming to a close.

The second reality is that they are going to be in charge, advancing the building of his kingdom. And looking around that circle, I'm sure Jesus is wondering, "What in the world was I thinking?" Even now they are still bickering among themselves as to who will be the greatest in the kingdom of God. They've given their lives to following Jesus, but they are just sure that not only is he the promised Messiah, which is true, but that he is about to ascend to the throne of Israel, and they are going to go in on his coattails and achieve great prominence. Peter is as impetuous as ever, with grandiose, misinformed ideas about his own sacrifice and service to the King. And what lies before them is going to be much different and much harder than they ever imagined. So as Jesus teaches them in these chapters, he wants to instill in them perspective and courage, and he wants to introduce the resources that will be available to them to lead in God's kingdom.

But before Jesus gets to the actual teaching part of the evening, he does something remarkable to demonstrate what it means to wield power and authority rightly. Let's read verses 1-11, the opening dramatic scene.

Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He should 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, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given

all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God, and was going back to God, rose from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, girded Himself about. Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. And so He came to Simon Peter. He said to Him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" Jesus answered and said to him, "What I do you do not realize now, but you shall understand hereafter." Peter said to Him, "Never shall You wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head." Jesus said to him, "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you." For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, "Not all of you are clean."

John may have been the youngest of the disciples, perhaps still a teenager, when the events he is recording in his gospel took place. He is writing this late in his life, after years of serving the Lord as a leader of the church, by now the elder of the church and perhaps the last living disciple. He starts off telling of this incident by describing the setting for us with a series of four participial phrases: Jesus' knowing something, Jesus' having loved somebody, the devil's having put something into Judas' heart, and Jesus' knowing something else. These phrases explain why Jesus will act decisively.

What Jesus knew

"Knowing that His hour had come that he should depart out of this world to the Father..." Jesus knew exactly what was about to transpire: He was on the eve of his own crucifixion. The whole reason for his coming to earth was about to be played out dramatically. He was going to go through all the physical and spiritual suffering of atoning for the sins of the world. But it would be the culmination of his work, and soon he would be returning to the glory of the Father.

"Having loved us his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." John didn't know at the time the depth of that love, but he would see it in the hours and days immediately following this scene. Now reflecting back on this event, he realizes that Jesus loved them to the very end, in spite of all their frailty, silliness, and petty bickering.

"The devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray him..." Looking back, John realizes that even as Jesus was about to wash the disciples' feet, Judas had already made his decision to betray him, and Jesus was aware of that.

"Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God, and was going back to God..." Jesus was fully aware of who he was: the heir of all things, the King of kings and Lord of lords, the beloved of God the Father, who was sent from God and who was going back to God. This is a description of someone who was absolutely self-aware; his self-knowledge was complete.

Jesus had no illusions about what he was about to enter into. He understood the betrayal in the heart of Judas. He knew the silliness and pettiness in the hearts of the disciples on whom he had focused his attention these last three years. But he also knew who he was as the Son of God, what he was about to do, and what would happen after it was done when he returned to the Father. Jesus didn't have to prove himself, and he didn't have to protect himself. Never has there been a person on this earth who was more keenly aware of who he was and what he was about to enter into than Jesus in that moment.

And now John paints the picture that Jesus was giving the disciples in a series of very simple declarative statements: He got up. He laid aside his garments. He took a towel and girded himself. He poured water. (The word translated "poured" is the same word, *ballo*, that John used to say that the devil "put" the treachery into the heart of Judas.) He washed and wiped the disciples' feet. He took his garments and again reclined at the table. In these simple statements is a powerful picture. When we lay this series of statements alongside

Philippians 2:6-11, we can see it clearly:

- Jesus got up: “Although He existed in the form of God, [He] did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped....” (Philippians 2:6).
- He laid aside his garments: “...But emptied Himself...” (Philippians 2:7a).
- He took a towel and girded himself: “...Taking the form of a bond-servant...” (Philippians 2:7b).
- He poured the water, and washed and wiped their feet: “And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8).
- He took his garments and returned to his seat: “Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11).

This wonderful parallel shows us how the event of Jesus’ washing the disciples’ feet portrayed the entirety of his mission in life. And here is a most wonderful picture of power used rightly. Knowing that he was the King of kings, knowing he came from the Father only to return to him, Jesus got up, removed his garments, took up the towel and the basin, and washed the disciples’ feet. He willingly and completely directed his power toward meeting the needs of those within his sphere of influence. Here Jesus portrayed for us what true spiritual leadership is all about: the emptying of oneself for the good of those to be served.

Daily cleansing

As Jesus went around the circle and washed the disciples’ feet, he came to Peter. Good old Peter--I’d laugh at him except he’s so much like me that it’s frightening. Peter was already embarrassed by the fact that Jesus was washing everybody’s feet and he himself hadn’t been smart enough to think of it. He said, “You’re not going to wash my feet, Lord!” Jesus looked at him carefully and said, “if I don’t do this, you have no part with me.” Peter’s pride gave Jesus the opportunity to teach them a deeper truth about the nature of salvation. Peter didn’t want to be exposed as someone in need of being washed. The physical reality of his dirty feet, and Jesus’ offering to wash them, was a picture of the need of Peter’s heart to be washed on a regular basis by the graciousness of God.

Peter immediately returned to his I’m-going-all-the-way-with-Jesus mentality and said, “Then wash all of me!” But Jesus explained, “You don’t need to be washed from head to toe. You’ve already been bathed.” That is an allusion to the wonder of the cleansing power of salvation in Christ, reflected in the words of Paul in Titus 3:5: “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit....” The disciples had placed their faith in Jesus as Messiah, and they had been cleansed from their sin, forgiven, in the glorious, gracious salvation that is given by God.

But all of us who have already been cleansed by the gracious mercy shown in Christ’s shed blood, live in this world and get sullied by the dirt of it. So there is a need not only for God’s once-for-all grace and cleansing from sin, but also for cleansing day by day, as symbolized by Jesus’ washing of the disciples’ feet. We must all have an ongoing reliance upon God’s grace in life. It is not our eternal salvation that is in question, but our fellowship with God day by day.

In this picture Jesus was trying to help the disciples see this, but Peter in his pride resisted. Peter would rather have washed Jesus’ feet than have Jesus wash his. Peter also would rather have died for Jesus than have Jesus die for him. Peter was holding on to that idea that you and I hold on to so firmly: “Certainly there is some noble thing in me that I can offer to Jesus as proof that I am worthy of him and his salvation.” But the picture here is

one of being required to accept the grace of God. I can't even wash my own feet. I have to have my feet washed by Jesus. I have to have my life cleansed by Jesus. Jesus was saying to Peter, "If you don't understand that you need to accept what I offer you by grace, this washing, you have no part with me." Peter needed, as we all do, to come to the point of saying, "I have nothing to bring, and unless you wash me I have no hope."

Understanding our absolute, total need for God's grace is the basis for true spiritual leadership. It is not because we are articulate or good-looking or powerful or great that we have authority. It is because we are men and women who have been transformed by grace, because we have seen that we have nothing to offer the Lord unless he touches us and cleanses us at the core of our being day by day. Otherwise we cannot be the kind of people that God calls us to be in his kingdom. You see, leadership is not about holding a position or having a title. *Leadership is about having a life worth following, a life given to those we lead.*

Even after all this, Peter, as we are going to see later, still didn't get it. A short time later he would say, "Jesus, I will never deny you. I'll go with you to the end." And he would learn the hard way. God would have to take Peter through total poverty before he was willing to accept God's grace.

Now, what does this mean for you and me? We need to begin with the question, are we willing to accept God's graciousness toward us?

There is a trilogy of poems written by Calvin Miller called *The Singer, The Song, and The Finale*. They are retellings of the life of Jesus. The Singer is the Christ character, and the World-Hater is the devil. There is a dialogue between them as they look out across a great metropolis, seeing all the pain and hopelessness in the lives of the people. The Singer asks the World-Hater, "How do you get them to worship all this nothingness?" The World-Hater replies, "I make them embarrassed to admit they are incomplete." (2)

So often that is our own attitude toward Christ. We are embarrassed to admit that we are incomplete, that we have a need so deep that nothing but the grace of God can meet it. But that is the doorway into the wonderful path of life in Christ, and the first step toward understanding what it means to be someone who can be a leader in God's kingdom.

True spiritual leadership

You may say, "Oh, I'm not a leader." But you are. Leadership is simply influencing people toward a goal. Every one of us has some influence. Being a mom or dad is a leadership role. Even kids have friends who are in their sphere of influence. You have influence in job situations, school situations, everyday relationships. So ask God to show you whom he has placed in your life for you to influence for his grace. When you begin to let God open your eyes to what he is doing in your life, ask him to show you how you can be a good leader. We'll explore this in a little more detail in the next message. The example of Jesus tells us that true spiritual leadership is not about pushing an agenda, defining or controlling someone else's life, or using someone else to achieve our own self-satisfaction. It's about giving ourselves to someone so that they might see the wonder of God's transforming love flowing through us.

When I first came on staff at PBC a number of years ago, one of the things that really attracted me to this church was the way it viewed leadership. There was no one person who was elevated for everybody else to follow. The way we do things here says that every one of us is a valuable and gifted person in the body of Christ. Some are gifted in some ways, some in others. Some are given certain jobs to do, some other jobs. But the whole philosophy behind it is simply this: The only authority that matters is Jesus'. Our spiritual leadership under his authority is about empowering other people to become who God wants them to be, about showing God's love and grace to build one another up. Of course we don't live that out perfectly; we are human and we need that daily dose of God's grace. But at least the foundation of who we are at this church celebrates the fact that as children of God, he has called us to serve others in his name.

In the next message we're going to "take off the gloves" and talk about what that really means. But let me just

say for now that God calls you to be a servant, to ask, again, whom God has graciously brought into your sphere of influence, and how you are mirroring the incarnation of Jesus, who laid aside heaven's glory, and also laid aside his garments to wash the disciples' feet. As the people of God adopt this attitude, it goes a long way toward relieving tension in marriages, discontent in church families--you name it. That is power wielded nobly, authority exercised righteously.

Notes

- (1) New Line Cinema, *The Lord of the Rings, Part One: The Fellowship of the Ring*, © 2001. Based on the book of the same title by J. R. R. Tolkien, © 1954, 1965, 1966, 1982, 1993, 1994, Ballantine Books, New York.
(2) Calvin Miller, *The Singer*. © 1975, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. P. 81.

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[Back to Index page](#)

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