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His Unfailing Love

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: John 13:1-19,21.

There are several things that become a message to us in this chapter, but we will all agree that this incident is the great example of love - "Having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them to the uttermost" (John 13:1, R.V. margin).

You recognise that this incident occurred near the end of the life of the Lord Jesus on the earth, which means that He had had all the experience of these men and knew what kind of men they were. Of course, He knew what He was choosing when He chose them: "for He himself knew what was in man" (John 2:25). He knew what a poor lot they were and all their faults and weaknesses. He knew just exactly how they would behave and how this phase of their relationship with Him would end. He knew beforehand what Judas would do, and indeed, exactly what they would all do. Yes, He knew them before He chose them - and then He chose them. And it says: "Having loved them... He loved them to the uttermost". It was not just that He loved them to the end. The Word says: 'He loved them without any reserve'; 'He gave them wholehearted love'. It is the most wonderful thing that you can think about.

It means that His love was never quenched by evil. He knew all about these men, all about Judas, but evil never quenched His love. It is stronger than all the evil, all the faults, and all the failures. What a lot you and I owe to that love! Where would we be today if His love could have been offended and put away because of what we are? He knew them; He chose them; He loved them; and nothing that came up in them changed His love.

That is the first thing about His love: *it is unchanged by evil*. Indeed, it is the evil that brings out the love.

The second thing is: how condescending is His love! You notice what it says here. John has read the heart of the Lord Jesus and says: "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands" (v.3). The Father had given all things into His hands; by the gift of the Father He possessed everything. He was put into that great position of having all things given to Him by the Father. I wonder what we would do if that were true of us! I am afraid we would be very superior people and look down upon one another. We would think of other people as hardly worth our consideration! "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He came forth from God, and goeth unto God, riseth from supper... and He took a towel." What meekness there is in this love! What a descending to the level of men! That is the love of Christ: coming down from the highest heights to serve such men for their salvation.

Then another thing is seen here: this love is above all class distinctions. "Ye call Me Master, and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am" (v.13). And presently He will say of them: 'Servants' ... "A servant is not greater than his lord" (v.16). All class distinction goes where there is the love of Christ. He is not acting as Master and Lord, but as a servant. The love of Christ knows no class distinctions, and with Him all are on the same level. The love of Christ puts us all on the same ground, and it is the ground which He Himself has taken.

Another thing: this love of Christ is practical love, not just sentimental love. The Lord Jesus was not saying, 'I love you' or putting His hand on their shoulders and saying, 'My beloved brother'. He was not just overflowing in sentimental love; He was putting that love into action. The love of Christ is always active love, the love which does things, not only says things. We have all had people call us 'beloved brother' or 'beloved sister', and we have lived to be very sorry for some of those very people have done us the greatest hurt in life. Yes, they call us 'dear brother', but they do us much hurt. The love of Christ is not like that. His love is active love; and He proved it was true love by what He did, and 'actions always speak louder than words'.

Then, the love of Christ is cleansing love. In His love for His disciples He washed their feet, and I think their spiritual feet needed more washing than their physical feet! He knew that and that is why He said: 'Do you know what I have done to you? Well, you do not know now, but you will know afterwards'. His great love in the cross was the great cleansing love. True love is cleansing love; it helps people to get rid of the dust of this earth that is on their spiritual feet.

Another thing: *this love of Christ was full of spiritual meaning*. He said: 'Do you know what I have done?' They might have said: 'Yes, of course we know. You have washed our feet'. And He would have said: 'Oh, no, I have done much more than that. I have taught you a great lesson for life. I have taught you that Divine love is like this, and you have come to learn something by My spirit, by My disposition. This is what love is. I have only acted a great spiritual truth. There is more in this towel and this basin and this water than you can see with the natural eye. It is the love behind all this, it is a love which conveys a great spiritual meaning.' The true love of Christ is always instructive love.

Now the last thing. Do you notice the position in which John puts this story? The other Gospel writers have put the Passover right at the end and then, immediately it is over, they go to Gethsemane, then to the cross. But John does not do that. He tells us something more than the others do, that after this Passover Jesus began to teach His disciples many things. And what is the first thing that He will teach them? We pass into chapters fourteen, fifteen and sixteen which are mostly about the coming of the Holy Spirit. He is speaking about 'that day' - "In that day" (John

16:23). What day? The day when the Holy Spirit will come. "If I go, I will send Him unto you" (John 16:7). I think it is very beautiful of John to have put it there.

What is your reaction to what I have been saying? I am sure you are saying, as I do: "Yes, that is all true of the Lord Jesus and of His love. That love was quite true of Him in all those ways: it was never set aside by evil or by the faults or failures of other people." All these things were true of His love, but what about me? I have to go right down before this and say: "No, that is not a picture of me. That is not the love that I have. I fail in all these things. If somebody does me some harm my love does not just overcome it. I fail at all points where Jesus triumphed." And yet He said that that has to be true of us as it is true of Him. Oh, how can that be? John immediately goes on to say that the Holy Spirit is coming - "And when He is come what is now impossible to you will then be possible", because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus and all things are possible if the Holy Spirit is in us. I am not surprised that He goes by the name of 'the Comforter'! When I see the Lord Jesus and His love, and then see myself, I need a comforter more than anything else. Jesus says: 'The Comforter will come. He will be in you and He will abide with you for ever. What is now impossible to you will then be possible.'

I think that is a good word with which to come to the Lord's Table: the message of His unfailing love.