



BONUS NOTES for The Spiritual Practices of Jesus: Service

JESUS KNEW. JESUS KNELT. JOHN 13:1-17

SUNDAY, JULY 26, 2026

1. "He got up"

Historical Context and Theological Symbolism: In the ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds, leaders and masters sat or reclined at the head of the table while being served. By physically rising while the meal was in progress, Jesus disrupted the expected social order. This is a physical reenactment of the Incarnation. Just as Jesus rose from His heavenly throne to come to earth, He physically rises from His position of honor at the table.

2. "He took off his outer garment"

Historical Context and Theological Symbolism: Outer robes (himation) signified a person's social status, authority, and standing in society. A master would never strip down, as it was considered undignified and exposed them to a lower social vulnerability. This mirrors Philippians 2:7, Christ "emptied Himself" by shedding His divine privileges. He voluntarily laid aside His visible majesty to be seen as a commoner.

3. "He wrapped a towel around His waist"

Historical Context and Theological Symbolism: Girding oneself with a towel was the specific, unmistakable uniform of a household slave. Jewish laws explicitly protected Jewish servants from being forced to wash people's feet because it was deemed too degrading; it was a task reserved strictly for non-Jewish slaves or the absolute lowest tier of society. Jesus did not just perform a temporary favor; He deliberately assumed the literal appearance, rank, and identity of a slave to serve His own followers.

4. "He poured water into a basin"

Historical Context and Theological Symbolism: While hosts typically provided water for guests to wash their own feet, a host would never pour the water or do the washing themselves unless they wanted to show radical, unprecedented hospitality. Jesus preparing the basin and water shock of the disciples, who realized their Master was preparing to do the dirty work. This foreshadows the spiritual cleansing of humanity. It visualizes how Christ pours out His own life and blood to wash away the spiritual filth of sin.

5. "He began to wash their feet"

Historical Context and Theological Symbolism: For a superior to wash the feet of an inferior was considered socially absurd and completely upended the ancient master-slave dynamic. This explains Simon Peter's intense, defensive pushback. To Peter, letting his Rabbi kneel in the dirt at his feet felt deeply shameful and wrong. This act redefines true greatness in the Kingdom of God as ultimate servanthood. Furthermore, Jesus' insistence that Peter must be washed to "have a part" with Him highlights that salvation requires absolute humility—we must allow ourselves to be served and cleansed by Christ, because we cannot save ourselves.

There is an additional step in John 13:12:

> "He put on his clothes and returned to his place,"

- **Historical Context:** Authority redefined; in both Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts, honor was maintained by social distance. Jesus' return to His place after serving shatters the idea that authority must be kept by avoiding lowly tasks.
- **Theological Symbolism:** This single sentence functions as the **closing movement** of Jesus' five intentional steps.
 - o **Incarnation → Cross → Resurrection:** The whole movement pictures pre-existence (reclining), incarnation/servanthood (robe off, towel on), atoning death (washing), and exaltation (robe on, place resumed).
 - o **Authority through service:** Jesus does not lose His lordship by serving; He reveals it. His return to the table shows that true authority in His kingdom is compatible with, and expressed through, humble service.
 - o **Model for disciples:** Immediately after this, Jesus asks, "Do you know what I have done for you?" and commands them to wash one another's feet. The restored posture underscores that the community's life is now to mirror His pattern: service, forgiveness, and unity.

Many theologians see the whole movement of → robe off → towel on → wash → robe back on as a picture of servanthood, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ seated at the right hand of God: Mark 16:19 | Romans 8:34 | Hebrews 1:3 | Ephesians 1:20 | Colossians 3:1

Adapted from the various resources:

1. Andreas J. Köstenberger. Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective.
2. Classic Theology – Augustine on John 13:1–5
3. Enduring Word (David Guzik) – John 13