

Session 6: Unless I Wash You

John 13:1-17, 36-38 and Luke 22:31-34 | 75 to 90 minutes | Young Adult Inductive Study

PART ONE: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim: The group discovers that on the last night, salvation is enacted before it is explained: the Master washes feet, and the non-negotiable of discipleship is letting yourself be served by God. They watch Peter refuse, relent, boast, and hear his fall and his future predicted in a single sentence of intercession.

Catholic Touchstone: We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:10, 19); we are washed before we are sent. Grace received precedes every service rendered, and pride can refuse a gift while wearing humility's costume.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

John frames the scene with the widest lens in his Gospel: “when Jesus knew that his hour had come... having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. And during supper... Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands... rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel” (John 13:1-4). Read the logic of those clauses carefully: it is precisely BECAUSE all things are in His hands that He picks up a towel. Omnipotence, given one evening to express itself, chooses the posture of the lowest household slave. Foot washing was so menial that some rabbis exempted even Jewish slaves from it. No one at that table would have washed another's feet; there was no one lower present to do it, until the Lord made Himself lower.

Peter's protest is the session's engine: “Lord, do you wash my feet? ... You shall never wash my feet” (John 13:6, 8). It sounds like humility, and it works as pride in humility's costume: Peter is still deciding what the Master may and may not do, still editing the plan, the same reflex as “God forbid.” He will serve Jesus gladly; what he cannot bear is being served, because receiving puts you on the low side of the exchange with nothing to offer back. Jesus' reply is one of the non-negotiables of the Gospel: “If I do not wash you, you have no part in me” (John 13:8). There is no version of Christianity in which we skip being cleansed and proceed directly to being useful. Salvation begins with a gift that can only be received, and the man too proud to receive it, however devout his refusal sounds, has no part in Him. Peter, hearing the stakes, swings to the other extreme with all his lovable excess: “not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”

Then two predictions land within minutes of each other, and your group should feel their proximity. In John, Peter asks “Lord, where are you going?” and Jesus answers, “Where I am going you cannot follow me now; but you shall follow afterward” (John 13:36), and Peter boasts: “I will lay down my life for you,” drawing the terrible reply about the cock. In Luke’s account of the same night, Jesus says: “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren” (Luke 22:31-32). Parse the pronouns with the group, because English hides them: “demanded to have you” is plural (all of you), “I have prayed for you” is singular (you, Simon). Satan asks for the group; Jesus intercedes by name for the one who will fall hardest. And notice what the sentence contains: the fall (“when you have turned again” assumes a turning away), the return (not if but when), and the mission after the return (“strengthen your brethren”). Peter’s collapse, recovery, and life’s work are all inside Jesus’ prayer before any of it happens. Nothing that is coming will catch Jesus by surprise, and nothing that is coming is outside His intercession.

Also note the address: “Simon, Simon.” Not Peter, though three verses later Jesus does say “I tell you, Peter” (22:34). The doubled old name at the hour of sifting is a resonance worth savoring: the name thread your group has been walking since Session 1 bends here; track it silently as a suggestive echo rather than a settled meaning.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Exodus 29:4 and 40:12-13 (the live discovery text; do not preview it). At the ordination of Aaron and his sons, the first act is washing: “you shall bring Aaron and his sons to the door of the tent of meeting, and wash them with water,” then vest them and consecrate them for priestly service. The Fathers and the Church’s liturgical instinct have long cherished the echo: on the night He instituted the Eucharist and commanded its repetition, Jesus began by washing the men He was consecrating. Present it as the Church’s cherished spiritual reading of the scene alongside the plain sense (the example of humble service, which Jesus Himself draws out in 13:12-17); the readings feed each other.

Genesis 18:4 and the custom. Water for the feet of guests was the first gesture of ancient hospitality, offered by Abraham to his three visitors. It was customarily provided: guests washed their own feet, or a servant did it; the host himself did not stoop to the task. Jesus takes the servant’s place at His own table.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. Augustine / *Tractates on the Gospel of John, Tractate 56*

On Peter’s “You shall never wash my feet,” St. Augustine refuses to let the protest pass as virtue: Peter, in terror at the sight of his Lord at his feet, was preferring his own sense of propriety to his Master’s declared will, and the Lord’s answer shows that the washing was no mere courtesy but a matter of having part in Him. For Augustine the scene teaches the order of the Gospel itself: we must be cleansed by Christ before we can belong to Christ, and the refusal of the gift, however reverent it sounds, is the one thing that separates.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom / *Homilies on the Gospel of St. John, Homily 70*

St. Chrysostom lingers on the evangelist's framing: knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, He washed feet. The full consciousness of His dignity did not compete with the towel; it produced it. Chrysostom presses the point on his hearers: our excuses for withholding lowly service all appeal to dignity, and the Lord of all has taken that appeal away from us forever. Greatness in His kingdom stoops.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Bernard of Clairvaux / *On the Steps of Humility and Pride*

St. Bernard's classic anatomy of pride teaches that humility is truth, the honest acceptance of what we are before God, and that pride takes subtle, even self-deprecating forms; it does not always strut. Applying his teaching to Peter's protest, we may say: pride can bow, refuse gifts, and insist on its own unworthiness, because what it cannot surrender is control of the exchange. In Bernard's spirit: the soul that will not be served by God is not humble; it is still negotiating.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 1337:** On the night He was betrayed, in order to leave His disciples a pledge of His love and never depart from His own, Christ washed their feet and instituted the Eucharist; the Catechism binds the towel and the table in a single paragraph.
- **CCC 1823:** Jesus makes charity the new commandment, loving as He has loved us, to the end; the foot washing is that love enacted hours before it is crucified.
- **CCC 2011:** Our merits are themselves God's gifts; everything we give Him, He gave first. The washed hands are the only hands that can serve.

THE WAY OF SALVATION (STUDY STRAND, LEADER ONLY)

MOVEMENT 6 OF THE KERYGMA: RECEIVING BEFORE GIVING

Salvation must be received before it can be imitated. The kerygma is not first a program for our generosity; it is news of His. Didactic texts: 1 John 4:10 (“not that we loved God but that he loved us”) and 4:19; Titus 3:5 (“he saved us... by the washing of regeneration”, a baptismal note that will bloom in Session 10). Two quiet plants for later, leader only: “you shall follow afterward” (John 13:36) resolves in the final session; “when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren” (Luke 22:32) resolves at the end of the study in Peter's own letters. Say nothing. Do not teach this strand aloud.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY, NEVER REVEAL)

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- **“Simon, Simon.”** The old name, doubled, at the hour of sifting. The name thread bends here; track it silently.
 - **“You shall follow afterward.”** John 13:36 is a loaded promise with a long fuse; it resolves in Session 12. If anyone asks what “afterward” means, smile and say the study will answer it.
 - **The intercession sentence.** Luke 22:32 contains Peter’s fall, return, and mission in advance. The group must have this verse firmly in memory before Session 7; the discussion guide plants it hard on purpose.
 - **The boast.** “I will lay down my life for you” meets the servant girl in the next session. Say nothing.
 - **Sifting and fire.** Sifting wheat and refining silver (next session’s Zechariah discovery) are cousin images: the ordeal that separates and purifies. Do not connect them aloud; the group will.

SESSION GOALS

1. The group articulates the logic of John 13:3-4: omnipotence expressing itself as service, and love to the end enacted before it is explained.
2. The group names Peter’s refusal as pride in humility’s costume and states the non-negotiable: we must let Christ wash us to have part in Him.
3. The group discovers the priestly washing of Exodus 29 and 40 and receives the Church’s cherished reading of the scene.
4. The group parses Luke 22:31-32 (plural and singular, fall, return, and mission foretold) and carries the verse out memorized in substance.
5. Distribute Take-Home 6; standing sealed-sheet reminder.

TIME NOTE

Core session runs about 80 minutes; it carries two texts. If long: cut the second Dig Deeper and one Win question. **Do not cut** the Exodus discovery, Question 6, or the Send questions.

PART TWO: DISCUSSION GUIDE

OPENING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, on the night you were betrayed, you loved your own to the end, and you began by kneeling. Teach us tonight what Peter had to learn at your feet: that before we can give you anything, we must let

you give to us. Wash what is unclean in us, warm what is cold, and bend what is proud, and do not let our refusals, even the reverent ones, keep us from having part in you. Amen.

WIN: OPENING QUESTIONS

Open questions; every answer is welcome.

W1. Which is harder for you, honestly: giving help or receiving it? Tell us about a time someone tried to do something kind for you and you resisted.

W2. Who is the greatest person you have ever seen do a genuinely menial task? What did watching it do to you?

BUILD: INTO THE TEXT

READ ALOUD: John 13:1-11

1. Read verses 3 and 4 as one sentence: “Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands... rose from supper... and girded himself with a towel.” John connects total power to the towel with a straight line. What is he telling us about God?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

That omnipotence, given one evening to express itself freely, chose the posture of the lowest household slave. The washing of feet was so menial that no one at that table would have done it for another; there was no servant present low enough, until the Lord made Himself the lowest. John is not showing us power condescending to a photo opportunity; he is showing us what the power of God is actually like when it is fully itself: it kneels, it serves, it loves “to the end.” Hours later the same logic will be nailed up in public. The towel is the cross in miniature, and both answer the question this study has been circling since the boat: what kind of Lord is this?

2. Peter's protest: “You shall never wash my feet.” Be careful before you grade it: it sounds humble. Is it? What is Peter actually refusing, and where have we seen this reflex in him before?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Beneath its reverent surface it works as pride in humility's costume: real awe may be present (Augustine hears terror in it), but Peter is still deciding what the Master may do. Peter will happily serve Jesus, fight for Jesus, die for Jesus (he says so within the hour); what he cannot bear is to be served, because receiving puts him on the low side of the exchange with nothing to offer back. And underneath the reverent words, notice who is still deciding what the Master may do: “never” is the vocabulary of “God forbid” (Session 4) wearing an apron. The group should sit with how precisely this diagnoses religious people: we would often rather exhaust ourselves for God than let Him love us, because service leaves our self-sufficiency intact and receiving does not. Bernard's principle that

humility is truth cuts here: the soul that will not be served by God is not humble; it is still negotiating.

3. Jesus' answer leaves no room: "If I do not wash you, you have no part in me." Weigh every word. Why is letting Him wash us not optional, and what does Peter's swing to the other extreme ("not my feet only but also my hands and my head!") get right and wrong?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Because the Gospel's order cannot be reversed: cleansing precedes belonging, gift precedes task, His service to us precedes all our service to Him. A Christianity that skips being washed and proceeds directly to being useful is not Christianity; it is self-salvation in a volunteer's vest. "No part in me" is as stark as "you have no life in you" from John 6, and it should be allowed to land with its full weight: the one thing that can keep a devout man out is refusing the gift. Peter's swing to hands and head gets the heart right (better everything than exclusion) and the mode wrong: he is still trying to manage the transaction, now by maximizing it. Jesus' calm reply ("he who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet") says: receive what I am giving, in the measure I am giving it. Grace is not improved by our seizing the ladle.

4. This washing happens on the same night, at the same table, where Jesus institutes the Eucharist and tells these men, "Do this in remembrance of me." Israel had seen an evening like this before: men washed with water at the door of the tent of meeting, on the day of their consecration.

Live discovery: say: "Read Exodus 29:1, 4 and Exodus 40:12-13 in pairs: who is washed, by whom, when, and for what purpose?" Let pairs report before the answer box.

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

The pairs should find: Aaron and his sons, brought to the door of the tent of meeting and washed with water as the first act of their ordination, then vested and anointed "that they may serve me as priests." The washing was the threshold of priesthood. The Church has long cherished the echo: on the night Jesus gave His apostles the Eucharist and the command to repeat it, He began by washing the men He was consecrating for that service. Offer this as the Church's treasured spiritual reading standing alongside the plain sense Jesus Himself draws out ("I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you," 13:15); the two readings feed each other rather than compete. Either way, the order holds for every disciple: washed first, then sent to serve.

READ ALOUD: Luke 22:31-34, then John 13:36-38

5. "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren." English hides something here: the first "you" is plural, the second is singular. Unpack this sentence like it is the most important thing said at the table, because for Peter it may be. What is in it?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Four things, and the group should find all four. First, the request: Satan has asked for all of them (plural), as he once asked for Job; the sifting is real and permitted. Second, the intercession: Jesus has prayed for Simon by name (singular), the one who will fall hardest, before the fall. Third, the fall itself, hidden in plain sight: “when you have turned again” assumes a turning away; Jesus knows, and says so without drama. Fourth, the future on the far side: not “if you recover” but “when,” and a mission waiting there: “strengthen your brethren.” Peter’s collapse, return, and life’s work are all inside Jesus’ prayer before any of it happens. Have the group say the verse back in their own words until its substance is memorized; they will need it soon, and they should also notice the address: “Simon, Simon,” the old name doubled with tenderness at the hour of sifting, an echo worth noticing.

6. Peter answers the warning with a boast: “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death”; in John, “I will lay down my life for you.” And Jesus tells him about the cock. Here is tonight’s hardest question: Peter is completely sincere. So what is the difference between sincerity and strength, and how does a person tell, in themselves, which one they are running on?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Peter means every word, and that is precisely the trap: sincerity measures the temperature of this moment’s feelings; strength is what remains at three in the morning, in the cold, when the feelings have gone home. Peter’s boast is built on self-knowledge (“I am ready”), and his self-knowledge is wrong; Jesus’ knowledge of him is right and is, notably, more merciful than Peter’s, since it comes wrapped in intercession and a guaranteed return. The diagnostic for the group: presumption talks about what I will do for God; dependence asks what God must do in me. “Though they all fall away, I will never” is presumption’s grammar (comparison plus self-confidence). “I have prayed for you” is the only ground that holds. Do not resolve the tension further tonight; tell the group plainly: “We follow Peter into the dark next week. Come.”

7. One more exchange before we leave the table. Peter asks, “Lord, where are you going?” and Jesus answers: “Where I am going you cannot follow me now; but you shall follow afterward.” What is Jesus promising Peter in that strange word “afterward”?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Keep this answer short and let it stay mysterious, because the study will collect on it later. At minimum: Jesus is going somewhere Peter, tonight, in his present strength, cannot go (the group now knows why: the boast is about to break). But “you shall follow afterward” is a promise, not a consolation prize: there will come a day when Peter can and will follow all the way. File the question and the promise away word for word: “Lord, where are you going?” and “you shall follow afterward.” This study is not done with them.

DIG DEEPER: THE TOWEL

The Greek says Jesus “girded himself” (*diezōsen*) with the towel: tied it on, the working dress of a slave at task. Keep the picture; it will matter later in the study that this scene printed itself on Peter’s memory, apron and all. For now, notice only that God tied on work clothes to save the world.

DIG DEEPER: SIFTED LIKE WHEAT

Sifting is violent: the grain is shaken, tossed, and torn from its husk so that what is wheat and what is chaff can finally be told apart. Satan’s request (the verb suggests demanding someone be handed over, as in Job’s story) is to shake the Twelve until they come apart. Jesus does not say the sifting is cancelled; He says the faith of the sifted man will not finally fail, because Someone is praying. The Church has read Luke 22:32 as bearing also on Peter’s office of strengthening the brethren; tonight, let it bear on his soul, and on ours: the ordeal is permitted, bounded, and prayed through.

SEND: TAKING IT WITH YOU

S1. Where, concretely, have you been refusing to let Christ (or anyone) serve you: in prayer, in the sacraments, in accepting help, in being loved without earning it? What would it cost your pride to say yes?

S2. Whose feet, figuratively or literally, is Jesus handing you the towel for this week: someone it would genuinely lower you to serve? Name them to yourself.

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1. Once this week, deliberately receive: let someone do something for you without deflecting, repaying, or minimizing it, and receive it as practice for grace. If you are Catholic and it has been a while, consider letting Him wash you in Confession, where the Lord who knelt with the towel still cleanses His own.
2. Do one act of genuinely menial service, the kind with no audience and no credit, and do it as apprenticeship to the towel.
3. Memorize the substance of Luke 22:32 (“I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren”). Carry it into next week; you will need it.

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, who knelt with a towel on the night we betrayed you: wash us, or we have no part in you. We surrender the pride that would rather serve than be loved, and the boasts we have made in our own strength. You have prayed for us that our faith may not fail; hold us to that prayer this week, and when we have turned again, make us a strength to our brothers and sisters. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"If I do not wash you, you have no part in me."

John 13:8 (RSV2CE)

Before you dismiss: hand out Take-Home 6; standing reminder about the sealed Session 1 sheet. Next week goes into the dark with Peter; encourage everyone to be there.

PART THREE: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

EVERY PASSAGE IN THIS SESSION

Primary Texts

- John 13:1-11, the towel, the protest, "no part in me"
- John 13:12-17, the example drawn out (read if time allows)
- Luke 22:31-34, Simon, Simon; the sifting; the intercession; the boast
- John 13:36-38, "where are you going"; "you shall follow afterward"; the cock

Live Discovery Texts

- Exodus 29:1, 4 and Exodus 40:12-13, washing at the threshold of priesthood

Supporting Texts

- Genesis 18:4, water for the feet: the grammar of hospitality
- Job 1:6-12, Satan's request to sift a righteous man (background to Luke 22:31)
- 1 John 4:10, 19, He loved us first (strand)
- Titus 3:5, the washing of regeneration (strand; blooms in Session 10)

Catechism

- CCC 1337, the towel and the table bound together
- CCC 1823, love to the end as the new commandment
- CCC 2011, our merits are His gifts

Memory Verse

- John 13:8, "If I do not wash you, you have no part in me."