

WASHING THE DISCIPLES' FEET

John 13:2-11

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He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him (Jn. 13:4-5).

I have learned a great many things in ministry. Among them is the value of letting people know that you care. Preachers would like to believe that people in church will receive our teaching based on the authority of God's Word, and to a certain extent they do. But many people are not willing to receive God's Word until they learn from experience that the minister loves them. Once they realize how much their pastor cares for them, they are often willing to receive even the most difficult Bible teaching from his lips.

This is something Jesus understood very well. Having arrived at his pivotal last night with the disciples, John says that Jesus knew "that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God" (Jn. 13:3). So the teaching Jesus was going to give at this Last Supper was of great importance, which is why it occupies four chapters in John's Gospel. Some of what Jesus would say would be hard for them to receive. So on this last opportunity to teach the disciples about God's saving love, Jesus began not with words but with action. Before speaking about God's love, he showed it to them. Jesus did this with the most remarkable behavior, taking up the place of a servant and washing the disciples' feet. D. A. Carson comments that by this stunning act of humility, our Lord offered "a display of love (v. 1), a symbol of saving cleansing (vv. 6-9), and a model of Christian conduct (vv. 12-17).¹

¹ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 462-463.

THE TOWEL-BEARING SAVIOR

The foot washing took place according to established cultural practices. It was considered the duty of a host to provide a servant who would greet guests with a basin and wash towel. The roads were not paved and, since most everyone wore sandals, the guests' feet would often be quite dirty and unpleasant. Moreover, since dinner was eaten at a low table, with the guests reclining on pillows with their feet extended outward, it was understandably important that feet should be washed. Just as we give our dinner guests an opportunity to "freshen up" before a meal, it was the custom for a servant to be provided to wash peoples' feet.

On this occasion, Jesus had borrowed a room to celebrate the Passover dinner with his disciples, so there was no servant to greet them. There would likely have been a basin and a towel by the door, and we can imagine the twelve disciples each maneuvering away, none volunteering to perform the odious task. This being the case, John writes that after they were seated, Jesus "rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him" (Jn. 13:4-5). Jesus was placing himself in the position considered too menial for even a Jewish slave, stripping down to his loin cloth and wrapping a towel around his waste, making himself the most humble servant of those he loved. Approaching his disciples one-by-one, he poured the water and wiped the dirt from their feet. Ever since, Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet has been an enduring symbol of humble, sacrificial servanthood.

John makes a couple of significant comments that provide context for what Jesus did. First, he notes that "the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him" (Jn. 13:2). This shows the Satanic inspiration for Judas's betrayal. It is curious that John points this out here; he seems to be contrasting the spirit within Judas with the spirit displayed by our Lord. Judas was moved by Satan whereas Jesus was moved by the loving will of God. What a contrast they present! The pride of Judas is contrasted with the humility of Jesus. We remember how Judas complained when Mary

used expensive perfume to wipe Jesus' feet; what must he have thought of their master bowing in the place of a servant! Furthermore, before coming to the meal, Judas had transacted to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver (Mt. 26:15). But Jesus' treasure is the hearts of his people. Judas thought only of his own self-interest, whereas Jesus was expending himself in service to others.

The contrast between the way of Satan and the way of Christ endures to this day. It does not require a government study to show that it is largely the values of Satan, revealed in Judas, that motivates worldly society. This is why Paul refers to Satan as "the god of this world" (2 Cor. 4:4). Jesus offers the only true alternative, a life of loving servanthood that follows Jesus' example. Paul exhorts us: "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:3-4).

The other significant statement is found in John 13:3: "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God." John says that Jesus was intensely conscious of the authority that God had given him, as well as his imminent return to his divine glory. With this awareness in his mind, we would expect Jesus to rise up from the supper and stake his claim to supremacy and homage. According to our way of thinking, he would insist, "Now you wash my feet!" But how different is the reality. F. W. Krummacher writes, "Think of the Holy One, who came down from heaven, thus engaged with sinners; the majestic Being, whom angels adore, abasing Himself to the occupation of a menial servant!"² The truth is that we would never have imagined this on our own, and Jesus' display of divine servanthood constrains us to humble adoration, renewed faith, and heartfelt repentance.

By this one act, Jesus challenges our understanding of the glory of God. Later that very evening, he would tell the disciples, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9). The God Jesus reveals is

² F. W. Krummacher, *The Suffering Savior* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1856, reprint, 2004), 31.

tender, compassionate, and servant-hearted towards the needs of his people.

This being the case, how are Christians to display God to the world? Is it by denouncing the wicked ways of the world? We do need to speak truth to the lies of our culture, just as Jesus often confronted falsehood and evil. Do we display God by winning arguments with unbelievers? Jesus debated with false religious teachers, although we seldom see him arguing with common people. But what about this? If Jesus, with his soul filled with the consciousness of deity, took up the place of the most menial servanthood to wash his disciples' feet, then any authentic display of God must be characterized by humility, tenderness, and sacrificial love. And if this is the truth about the God we are called to glorify in the world, how we ought especially to take up the towel of Jesus in our marriages, in our home life, and in our fellowship in the church? It will be when the world sees us ministering with humble, tender love to the stinky feet of each other's lives – the places where there is pain, ugliness, failure, and need – that they will realize that the Spirit of God is in our midst. To do this, just as Jesus took off his garments, we must take off all our pride, all our envy, and everything else that hinders us from taking up the basin to wash the feet of others.

THE NECESSITY OF CHRIST'S CLEANSING

We can only imagine what was going through the various disciples' minds as Jesus washed their feet, one-by-one. But we do not have to wonder what was in Peter's mind, because as usual his thoughts came immediately out of his mouth. Peter was confused and astonished: "He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, do you wash my feet?'" (Jn. 13:6). His meaning is more emphatic in the Greek text, where "you" and "my" are placed together. Literally it reads: "You, my feet to wash?" The idea of the Lord of glory washing his dirty feet simply did not fit with Peter's way of thinking.

Jesus patiently responded: "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand" (Jn. 13:7). Jesus was

referring to after his death and resurrection, which fulfilled all that the foot-washing symbolized. This reminds us that Christians will often find it hard to understand what the Lord is doing in our lives. He may lay a calling on us that we would never have chosen, or he may answer our prayers in ways that are perplexing to us. Jesus' response to Peter forms a good rule for us all: "It's true that you don't understand now. But trust in me, believe my Word, accept my providence, and in the end you will understand."

Peter was not yet ready to patiently await the unfolding of Christ's purpose. With his characteristic inconsistency, Peter was too humble to allow Jesus to wash his feet, but proud-hearted enough to rebuke his Master's actions: "Peter said to him, 'You shall never wash my feet'" (Jn. 13:8).

It is a good rule in general that when we find ourselves arguing with or rebuking the word of the Lord, we are getting ourselves into trouble. Peter was shocked when Jesus showed just how wrong was his attitude: "Jesus answered him, 'If I do not wash you, you have no share with me'" (Jn. 13:8).

This was a most serious response from the Lord. The Greek word for "share" (*meros*), generally indicates an inheritance. So Jesus was telling Peter that unless he washed him, Peter could not enter into Jesus' inheritance – that is, he could not enter into heaven.

With these words, Jesus advances from the symbol of the foot-washing to the reality symbolized by it. For Jesus' act of servanthood was more than a mere demonstration of humility; it was a prelude to the greater humiliation of the cross. Jesus "was giving a dramatic illustration of his entire ministry,"³ in keeping with the great summary he had earlier spoken: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt. 20:28).

If we follow the sequence of events that John recalls in Jesus' foot-washing, we can see how closely they correspond to Jesus' ministry in the world. First, Jesus rose from his seat, just as he rose from his heavenly in order to come into our world. Second, he "laid aside his outer garments." This closely echoes Paul's words in describing how

³ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 4:1010.

Christ in set aside his glory: “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped” (Phil. 2:6). Next, Jesus took a towel and tied it around his waist. Likewise, Paul states that Jesus “made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:7). Fourth, Jesus “poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet, just as in a few short hours he was to pour out his blood for the washing away of human sin by the atonement.”⁴ Fifth, Jesus completed his enacted parable by rising again and taking his seat back at the table, which corresponds with Jesus’ resurrection and ascension into glory after the finished work of his cross. Hebrews 1:3 says, “After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.”

This is why Jesus responded the way he did to Peter. If Peter was not willing to allow Jesus the partial humiliation of washing his feet, how was he to embrace the full and complete humiliation that would be Jesus’ agonizing death on the cross the very next day? And unless Jesus cleanses us with the true wash of his shed blood for our sins, we cannot have any part of the salvation that he offers.

This is the most grave and significant matter any of us can ever face. Despite his infant faith, Peter did not fully understand the one way to be restored to God. How else might we partake of the salvation God offers? Can it be through good works? Religious exercises? Service in Christ’s name? Notice that Jesus insists that even Simon Peter, the chief of his apostles, cannot partake of his salvation unless he is cleansed by the blood that Jesus would shed on the cross.

People often tell jokes about what will happen when they try to get into heaven. Usually, those jokes involve meeting St. Peter at the pearly gates, based on the false teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that Peter decides who gains entry into heaven. But if you were to meet Peter at the pearly gates, what right would you claim to be received into the inheritance of Christ? Most people answer that they have been basically good people. But Peter, now perfected in glory, and unquestionably remembering what Christ taught him with

⁴ Ibid.

the basin in his hands, would surely reply: “Unless you have been washed by Christ, you have no part in him!”

Christ having now died on the cross, he comes to each of us, no longer with symbolic water but with the shed blood of his cross. He comes to cleanse you. What will you say? Will you turn away, unwilling to admit your need of cleansing for your sins? Will you echo Peter: “You, my sins to cleanse?” Will you proudly insist that you will decide your own way into eternal life? If you respond in any of those ways, Christ, having now fully taken up his power and authority as Lord of heaven and earth, the divine Son enthroned in glory, will say to you: “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me” (Jn. 13:8). Leon Morris writes:

Jesus was about to die, to die the atoning death that meant cleansing for his people. There is no other way of being Christ’s than in receiving the cleansing he died to bring. If he does not wash us in this way, we have no part with him... It is only in accepting the truth that we cannot secure our salvation by our own effort, but that Christ can cleanse all who trust him, that we are freed from our sin and brought into Christ’s salvation.⁵

CLEAN SOULS, DIRTY FEET

Peter loved Jesus and trusted him enough to realize that his Lord was speaking in deadly earnest. Immediately, his opposition to the foot washing fell away. Instead, he blurted out his new idea about what Jesus should do: “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” (Jn. 13:9).

Once again, Peter would have done better simply to allow Jesus to minister to him in grace and tell Peter what needed to be done. But it was still a good response; realizing his need to be cleansed, Peter wanted to be cleansed all over. But Jesus answered: “The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean” (Jn. 13:10).

This is an important statement that tells us much about the daily walk of followers of Christ. First, Jesus insists that those who come to him in faith receive a once-for-all cleansing that need never be repeated.

⁵ Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 469.

Jewish dinner guests would bath at home, and it was only because they walked through dirty streets that their feet needed to be washed. Likewise, whoever receives the cleansing ministry of Christ's atoning blood is clean once-for-all.

Jesus is referring to our standing before the presence of God's holiness. He declares to all who belong to him through saving faith: "You are clean." This means that with his shed blood Jesus paid the debt of all the sins of those who trust in him. This means that as God sees you in Christ, you are completely clean forever. If you have confessed your need of the cleansing Jesus offers and believed on him for the forgiveness of your sins, you will never be more clean in the sight of God than you were at that moment and than you are right now. Moreover, the Bible teaches that Christ's own perfect righteousness is imputed, or reckoned, to us, so that believers in Christ stand before God dressed in the perfect righteousness of Jesus himself. Paul explains the great transaction by which Christ took our sins to the cross and placed his own cleanliness upon us: "[God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). A. W. Pink comments:

The moment a sinner, drawn by the Holy Spirit, comes to Christ, he is completely and finally cleansed. It is the apprehension of this which gives a firm rock for my feet to rest upon. It assures me that my hope is a stable one; that my standing before God is immutable. It banishes doubt and uncertainty. It gives the heart and mind abiding peace to know that the benefits I have found in Christ are never to be recalled. I am brought out from under condemnation and placed in a state of everlasting acceptance... I stand resplendent in the sight of God in all the Saviour's beauty and perfections. God looks upon believers not merely as forgiven, but as *righteous*: as truly as Christ was "made sin" for us, so we have been "made the righteousness of God in him."⁶

But just as dinner guests got their feet dirty on the way to the meal, Jesus says that only our feet need to be cleansed as we walk through this world: "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet" (Jn. 13:10).

Jesus was pointing out that believers still live in a dirty world. We are touched by it, impacted by it, and we continue to be infected by its

⁶ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 712-713.

sins. We are clean in the sight of God, but our feet are soiled as we walk through this world. Therefore it is not our standing before God that needs on-going cleansing, but our walk as Jesus' disciples that compels us to bring our feet to the towel-wearing Savior. This is why Jesus taught believers regularly to pray, "Forgive us our debts... lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (Mt. 6:12-13).

There is not a single Christian whose walk in this world is not polluted by sin. Jesus knows this. He knows that we fall into sin. He knows that our minds are polluted with the evil of the world. He knows that our hearts are poisoned by foul streams, so that we are brought into confusion, grief, and sometimes even despair. John Calvin observes that dirty feet are "a metaphor for all the passions and cares by which we are brought into contact with the world... Therefore Christ always finds something in us to cleanse."⁷

These two, taken together, are keys to the spiritual life of Christians. First, we must know that our standing with God is never in jeopardy once we have been cleansed by the ministry of Christ's atoning blood. As water cleanses the body, Jesus cleanses us with his blood from the stain and the guilt of our sins. We are not accepted by God on Monday because we think we performed at an acceptable level, but cast out on Tuesday because we were swept up by the world. In Christ, through sincere and saving faith in Christ's blood, we are fully and finally accepted every day and forever, not because of the sufficiency of our performance but because of the perfect sufficiency of Jesus' performance for us on the cross. The second principle is that we must return to Christ again and again, daily bringing the dirty feet of our hearts to the basin in his loving hands. John writes in his first epistle: "The blood of Jesus [God's] Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn. 1:7-9).

NOT EVERY ONE

There is a post-script to the foot washing that presses upon us the defining seriousness of the cleansing ministry of Christ. Jesus

⁷ John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, trans. T.H.L. Parker, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 5:59.

said, "You are clean, but not every one of you" (Jn. 13:10)." John explains, "For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean" (Jn. 13:11).

Judas had received many benefits as Jesus' disciple. He was there for many of the miracles and the teaching of God's holy Son. But in the pride of his heart, he never opened his heart for cleansing. In his love for money and worldly position, he never sought a place in the family of God. Therefore, though Jesus washed his feet, the blood of the cross was never applied to the record of his sins, and because of the privilege of his discipleship he was all the more condemned before the holy justice of God.

It is remarkable that Jesus washed Judas' feet along with the others. He thus exemplified his command to love our enemies. This also means that when Judas departed to meet with the chief priests and Pharisees who plotted Jesus' death, hatching his plan to betray Jesus with a kiss, he went with feet that were washed by Jesus' hands. How many people are like that today! They enjoy the benefit of participation in the church or of fellowship with God's people. Their hearts are temporarily lightened by singing songs of praise or by listening to prayers. But their guilt is never washed away and their souls are never renewed for the simple reason that they refuse to humble themselves before the cross of Christ. How dirty was Judas's guilty soul. How black was his record before God as he passed into condemnation. How quickly his feet became dirty again as he walked through the Garden of Gethsemane to betray the Savior.

If Judas were among us today he would be baptized, a member of the church, and chairman of the deacons. Yet with his soul uncleansed by the blood of Christ, he still would be lost. Let us learn the lesson of the washing of the disciples' feet. Jesus is a humble, servant Savior. He came into the world not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for our sins (Mt. 20:28). Let us, therefore, with all of Peter's impetuous faith, though hopefully without his impetuous folly, submit ourselves to Jesus with joy. "Cleanse me, Lord," let us cry. "Wash me whiter than snow with the blood of your cross, and cleanse me daily from my sins."