

FILTHY FEET
John 13:1-17

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Introduction

It strikes me as odd. You live in the same world as others. You have the same friends as others. You go to the same places. But there is something different about you. You love, you care, you go, you do, you give. And if I were to recite all the good things you've done, you'd be embarrassed and angry at me for saying it. Where do you get that from? The difference is you have taken the time to attend to the spirit, the God-given spirit, the in-God's-image spirit, the God-like quality in yourself – you nourish it, you feed it, you pray with it, you let it breathe. And the Spirit of Christ in you increases and eventually really shapes who you are. That's the difference. (Fred Craddock, *The Cherry Log Sermons*, p. 23)

The roads of Palestine were dirty and dusty. When the weather was dry, they were inches deep in dust. And when wet, they were liquid mud. Shoes, of course, were nothing more than leather straps—sandals. But the roads had more than just dust on them. They usually contained garbage and the waste from the animals who traveled up and down the streets. Sandals without socks, and feet which would become very, very filthy.

The custom of the day was to recline at the table at the evening meal. Dirty, smelly feet could make table fellowship rather uninviting. Slaves, therefore, were often provided to meet guests at the door and wash their filthy feet. It was considered a mark of honor for a host to provide a servant to wash the guests' feet, and to fail to provide such a servant was a breach of hospitality.

I. Taking the Towel (13:1-5)

Most likely “before the feast of the Passover” is an indication that this story in John's Gospel parallels the institution of the Lord's Supper in the other, Synoptic Gospels.

There are certainly some indications that the night of the foot washing in John can be equated with the night of the establishment of the Lord's Supper in the other Gospels: (1) the reference “before the feast of the Passover; and (2) the fact that this is an evening meal when Judas departs into the night (compare Matthew 26:20-25; Mark 14:18-21). Knowing that his “hour had come,” refers us back to our sermon from chapter 12, where the arrival of the Greeks seeking Jesus was a clear indication to him that “the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (12:23). Combining the remarks in chapter 12 (12:23) with those here in chapter 13 (13:1), we can certainly conclude that the arrival of the cross did not take our Lord by surprise. “The hour” in chapter 13, however, is not thought of in terms of glory (like chapter 12), but, rather, in terms of leaving this world and going to the Father.

Chapter 13 is a marker that ends much of Jesus' public ministry and focuses on his ministry and love for his own, his disciples. Here in verse 1, John makes clear that Jesus loved his own "to the end." The expression "the end" (*telos*) is literally interpreted "chronologically," meaning "to the last point in time." Given the chronological interpretation, it may be an indication that he loved his disciples all the way to the cross, all the way to his death. On the other hand, *telos* can also be taken to mean something along the lines of "to the uttermost" or "completely."

Unfortunately, this intimate time between the rabbi and his disciples also includes the active presence of the devil, who is described by John as entering the heart of Judas for the purpose of betraying Jesus. Earlier, Jesus had already declared Judas to be the devil (6:70-71). In this particular story, the intimate union between the devil and Judas is displayed in all of its fullness. Quite clearly, it is no longer just humanity that opposes and challenges Jesus, but nothing less than the powers of the cosmos, the power of Satan.

John's Gospel often presents Jesus in his most divine light. Here, we look into the mind of Jesus as we learn that he himself knew that God had given all things into his hands (v. 3). Standing on the threshold of Calvary is an ironic place to declare that Jesus has powers over all things. Reflecting back on the cross as he writes his Gospel, however, John does not see the cross as a casual observer. To him, it had become a place that, in fact, represented both God's divine work and the working out of his glory through the crucifixion of his Son (12:28). Having told us in his introduction that the Word had been with God before he put on flesh (chapter 1), John now reminds us, once again, that the Son had come forth from the Father and was going back to him.

The first disciple entered the Upper Room and discovered there was no servant to wash feet. He has to make a decision. Does he wash his own feet? Does he take off his outer garment, go and get the water, and wash everyone else's feet? Look deep in his eyes. Look at them right now. Look him in the eye. He's thinking, "Not me. That's not my job. I'm not a slave. I'm no foot-washer." He tries to figure out where Jesus is going to sit and chooses an advantageous position at the table.

The second disciple enters, realizes there is no foot-washer, and sees his friend already seated at the table in a place of honor. He thinks, "If he's not going to stoop to the level of a foot-washer, then neither am I." And he heads toward, of course, the second-best seat in the house.

All the disciples do the same thing. They all file in and walk past the water basin.

Then Jesus arrives. He looks over at the water. He looks at the filthy feet of His followers. You can see it in His eyes. Three years – sermon after sermon, story after story, confrontation after confrontation with them – and they just don't get it.

He walks to the table and reclines. He just sits there silently. Maybe someone will at least have the humility to wash the feet of their Master. Nobody moves.

Now watch Him.

(www.christchurch-viriginiawater.co.uk/sermons/john13a.htm)

Right in the middle of the meal, the Messiah did the most unlikely thing: He took up the towel so he could wash feet (v. 4). It is hard for us, as modern readers, to actually understand the menial nature of the task at hand. Foot washing was even beneath the servant, a task reserved for only a slave. “Foot washing” could actually be used as a synonym for slavery itself. By this act, Jesus violates social customs with such a degree that there is no fitting comparison.

Jews even insisted that Jewish slaves could not be required to wash feet, as this horrific job should only be reserved for the Gentiles. In one ancient story, Rabbi Ishmael returned home from the synagogue one day, and his mother wished to wash his feet. He refused on the grounds that the task was too demeaning for his mother. The mother, in turn, took the matter to the rabbinic court on the grounds that she viewed the task, in the case of her son, as an act of honor.

We should picture the disciples reclining on thin mats around a low table. Most likely, each was leaning on his left elbow, with the legs and feet radiating outwardly from the table. Jesus pushes himself up from his own mat. John gives us the greatest of detail: (1) he laid aside his outer garment; (2) he picked up a towel; (3) he wrapped the towel around his waist, taking on the posture of a slave; (4) he poured water into the basin; and, finally (5) he washed the disciples’ feet (v. 5), and, finally, (6) he wiped the disciples’ feet. Such detail reminds us that our writer, John, was in the room as a witness to the shocking events; his own feet had been cleansed by the washing of our Lord.

Seeing our Lord in this light causes shockwaves to reverberate all the way from the first century to our own! It reminds us of the words of the Apostle Paul when he writes, “One who was in the very nature of God...made Himself nothing and took the very nature of a servant” (Philippians 2:6-7). Indeed, he became “obedient to death—even death on the cross” (Philippians 2:8). In Luke 22:27, Jesus himself said, “I am the One who serves.”

On this occasion, He who wraps the heavens in clouds, wrapped around Himself a towel. He who pours the water into rivers and oceans tips water into a basin. And He, before whom every knee bends in heaven and on earth and under the earth, knelt to wash the feet of His disciples. (Severian of Gabala, around 400 B.C.)

The washing of the feet by Jesus has been interpreted in numerous ways.

- (1) As an example of humility. In fact, the story will conclude by Jesus saying that even as he has washed the disciples’ feet, they ought also to wash one another’s feet (13:14).
- (2) As a symbol of the Lord’s Supper (Eucharist). Since John’s Gospel does not give a detailed account of the Lord’s Supper, we could see this as John’s presentation of the important event.
- (3) As a symbol of baptism—washing and cleansing by water.
- (4) As a symbol of the cleansing that comes from the crucifixion of Christ. If he can get our filthy feet clean, certainly he can cleanse our hearts.
- (5) As a sacrament that the church should observe even today. Some argue that, like the observance of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, Jesus commands us to also wash feet.

Perhaps the truth is found in the mixture of the various meanings—one is not forced to choose one above the other.

II. Also My Hands and My Head (13:6-10)

The words “and so” are most likely an indication that Simon Peter is neither the first to have his feet washed nor the last. We might interpret it something like this, “And then it was Peter’s turn.”

Until this point there was nothing but awkward silence in the room. To be sure, each and every one of the disciples must have felt the incongruity of having their feet washed by the Christ. Peter, however, as is characteristic of his responses, does not hesitate to say what others will only think (v. 6). We should not miss the emphatic tone of the Greek text. Peter’s question should read this way: “Lord, do You wash my feet?” Peter is saying, “Someone as wonderful as you, O Lord, will not wash the feet of someone as dreadful as I.” New Testament scholar D. A. Carson concludes, “As the disciples cannot yet understand how the one whom they venerate as Messiah must go to the cross, so they cannot understand the symbol-laden acts that anticipate it.”

Jesus responds to Peter with an equally emphatic statement. We might interpret it this way, “What I do, you do not understand now” (v. 7). Jesus makes clear, however, that Peter will understand “hereafter.” A literal translation of the Greek would read, “after these things.” Quite clearly, this seems to be a reference not to the foot washing itself, but to the Passion of Christ for which the foot washing serves as a symbol. Jesus is saying: “After My death and resurrection, Peter, you will understand that in humbling Myself to wash your feet, I have shown that I will, likewise, humble Myself to die in your place.”

Still not catching on, Peter’s response is characteristically flamboyant. He uses the strongest negation that can possibly be used in the Greek language. Let me translate it this way: “Lord, never, ever, ever, shall You wash my feet.” In fact, the “never, ever” is represented by Greek words which mean “in all eternity”! Oddly enough, Peter is humble enough to see the incongruity of Christ’s action in washing feet, yet proud enough to dictate to his Master.

Jesus, as always, has the last word. He retorts, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.” “Wash,” of course, has a double meaning here. First, it means that Peter must submit to having his feet washed by his very Messiah. Though Peter cannot see it now, he will later understand that it also means that Peter must be washed from sin by the crucifixion of the Christ. Apart from this cleansing by the blood, no one can have a part in Christ. The notion of “having a part” (*meros*) was used in antiquity to represent one’s position in an inheritance (v. 8). It grew through Jewish thought to also indicate that one might participate in eschatological (end time) blessings (see Matthew 24:51; Revelation 20:6). The word, in fact, is tied to belonging to Jesus Christ and to the people of God (Luke 12:46; Revelation 22:19). Though Peter could not understand the foreshadowing of the cross in the foot washing, he did understand enough to know that whatever it took, he wanted to be part with Christ.

Your relationship with Jesus is based on one thing: He’s a Savior, you’re a sinner, and you need him to cleanse you, to wash your feet. And if you do not come and allow Him to wash you, to cleanse you, you can have no relationship with him. Every relationship with Christ begins with His cleansing, His forgiveness.

At the beginning of our journey of discipleship, we are washed in the baptistry. It's the image of washing away our sins, as well as dying with Him and rising with Him. You must allow yourself to be loved by Jesus.

Equally exuberant in his submission as he had been in his rejection, Peter replies, "Not just my feet, but my hands and my head as well!" Jesus makes it clear that such an entire "body washing" is not necessary (v. 10). The image, perhaps, is that of a man going to a feast. First, he bathes at home. When he arrives from his journey on foot, he only needs to wash his feet to sit at the table wholly clean. Theologically, we must understand that Jesus is indicating that the fundamental cleansing that comes through Christ's crucifixion is a once-and-for-all act—no more cleansing is required.

It should be noted, additionally, that Jesus turns to plural pronouns in verse 10, indicating that it is not Peter alone to whom he speaks. When Jesus says, "You are clean," he is speaking to the entire apostolic band and all who would eventually call Jesus "Lord." He does note ominously, however, that not all are clean (v. 10).

III. Washing the Feet of the Betrayer (13:11)

The hardest thing that Jesus ever asked his disciples to do is to love their enemies. In the Sermon on the Mount, he even says, "Pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). Would the Master ever ask his disciples to do something that he himself would refuse to do?

We receive that answer in verse 11, as Jesus washes the feet of the very one who is about to betray him. Notice how the story is set up in verse 2, as we read that, during this very supper, the devil entices the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus. Can you imagine the magnitude of the Messiah taking a bowl and, with his own hands, gently washing the feet of the one who would hand him over!

Be aware, however, Judas might have been washed, but he was not cleansed (6: 64). In the only other place in the fourth Gospel where Jesus tells his disciples that they are clean, Judas is not present (15:3): "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you." Real cleansing comes not from foot washing, but from the cross of which the servanthood of foot washing is a symbol.

IV. You Also Ought to Wash One Another's Feet (13:12-17)

Jesus declares that they call him both teacher (*didaskalos*) and Lord (*kurios*). *Didaskalos* means "teacher" and is equivalent to the term "rabbi" used often by the disciples for Jesus. In fact, the followers of John the Baptist address John that way (3:26). "Lord" is a more complex term that can mean anything from simply "sir" to the highest term applied to Yahweh himself. On this occasion, coming from Jesus' disciples, we can safely assume they use it in its highest form. Those who had the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) as their primary scripture, often called God himself "Lord." In fact, in John's Gospel, when Thomas touches Jesus' scars and finally understands that Jesus has been resurrected, he makes the greatest proclamation found in this Gospel. He says to Jesus, "...[you are] my Lord (*Kurios*) and my God" (20:28).

Some Christians—even some Baptists—have taken Jesus’ command for imitation of foot washing to establish the rite as the third ordinance of the church: baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and foot washing. Perhaps in instituting the rite, however, they have missed the very point of our Master. It is not the bowl of water and a towel that are to be repeated, but, rather, the spirit of service and humility. We should also note, moreover, that there is no evidence anywhere in the New Testament, nor in the earliest extra-biblical documents, that foot washing was ever treated by the early church as an ordinance. In fact, one could easily go through the motions of foot washing and miss the message of our Messiah that one be willing to humble himself and serve others, even be willing to wash the feet of his enemy.

Foot washing is not, however, just Christ’s model, but also his mandate for humble service. This message from our Master is often repeated: “...whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant” (Matthew 20:26).

Unless we are willing to pull up our robes, take up the towel, and wash the feet of our fellow Christians, we will never be like our Christ.

Conclusion

When Brennan Manning was waiting to catch a plane in the Atlanta airport, he sat down in one of the many places where men shine shoes. An elderly man began to shine Brennan’s shoes. And Brennan had this feeling inside that after his shoes were shined, he should pay the man, tip the man, and reverse the roles.

When the man had finished shining his shoes, Manning stood up, looked at the man, and said, “Now, Sir, I would like to shine your shoes.” The man recoiled, stepped back, and said, “You’re going to do what?”

“I’d like to shine your shoes. Come on, you sit down here. How would you like them done?”

The old man began to cry and said, “No one ever shined my shoes before.”

As you listen to the Messiah’s mandate, are you willing to wash feet? Even the feet of your enemy?

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