

Washing One Another's Feet

So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them. John 13:12-17

It was the Thursday evening prior to Jesus's crucifixion. Jesus was well aware that the time for His departure from this world was near. He, together with His disciples, including Judas Iscariot, had gathered in Jerusalem to partake of the feast of the Passover. Together, they remembered that extraordinary night when the angel of death had passed over the homes of the children of Israel, while visiting the homes of the Egyptians, killing every first born son. They could not help but recall Israel's deliverance that night, as they ate the paschal lamb; the lamb serving as a poignant reminder of how it was only when the children of Israel sprinkled the blood of a lamb, without spot or blemish, upon the doorposts of their homes, that the angel of death passed over them. The lamb pointing to the promised Messiah and to His shed blood; to the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. The Lamb whose sacrificial death atoned for the sins of God's people, thereby delivering them from the wrath of God that otherwise would have fallen upon them. Though not fully appreciated by His disciples, that Lamb of God was in their midst and that Lamb would soon be slain.

While Jesus and His disciples were in the upper room in Jerusalem that night, three significant events took place. Those events occurred in the following order: Jesus washed the feet of His disciples; Jesus dismissed Judas Iscariot; and He instituted the Lord's Supper.

The incident of Jesus washing of the feet of His disciples appears only in the gospel of John. As Jesus Himself notes, His action in washing the feet of His disciples was exemplaristic. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.

A simple, but profound, example that the church of Jesus Christ would do well to follow.

To grasp the significance of Jesus's actions and its relevance for the church today, it is necessary to reflect on what had occurred earlier that day. Jesus and His disciples had spent most of the day in Bethany, which was located just east of Jerusalem. During the course of the day, Jesus had sent Peter and John into Jerusalem to make ready the Passover. The preparations consisted in locating a room large enough to accommodate Jesus and the twelve disciples. They also had to purchase a lamb and take it to the temple where it would have been slain. The lamb would have been roasted and eaten at the Passover meal.

Late that same afternoon, Jesus and the remaining disciples followed Peter and John into Jerusalem. The trip from Bethany involved only a few kilometres, though it would have involved travelling over dusty and probably unpaved roads. Open sandals were the common footwear of the day. Consequently, such a journey would have resulted in the feet of Jesus and His disciples becoming soiled with dirt. To address that issue, it was common in that day for the host of a feast to provide water and a towel for the washing of the feet of his guests. This was considered a necessity prior to partaking of a meal because meals were often eaten in a reclined position around a low central table, so that the feet of one guest were located in close proximity to the head of another.

It is significant to note that prior to the disciples' arrival in Jerusalem, there had been some intense discussions between them, so intense that Luke describes the subject under discussion as a "contention." The tension centred around the issue of "which of them should be accounted the greatest" (Luke 22:24). Filled with favourable perceptions of themselves, they compared themselves to one another. Not surprisingly, their assessments did not always coincide.

This was not the first time that this issue had arisen in their midst. On an earlier occasion, the mother of James and John sought to ensure a privileged position for them in the earthly kingdom that she anticipated that Jesus would establish. "Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom" (Matthew 20:21). On that occasion, Jesus set before His disciples a completely different conception of greatness in His kingdom to the one that they entertained. Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:25-28)

Now the issue had arisen again. The catalyst was possibly the prominence afforded to Peter and John in being selected by Jesus to attend to the preparations for the feast of the Passover. Whatever the reason, as the disciples came into Jerusalem this issue as to "which of them should be accounted the greatest" was simmering away.

As noted, it was customary, when guests arrived at a feast, for the host to supply a servant to perform the menial and somewhat unpleasant task of washing the ingrained dirt and filth from the feet of the guests upon their arrival. However, upon arriving at the upper room there was no servant to perform that function for Jesus and His disciples. The meal had been prepared; the meat had been cooked and they were ready to sit down to eat; the pitcher of water was there; the towel was there; there was even a basin; but no servant.

Who among the disciples would perform this servile role? The answer was none of them. The tension among them over which of them should be accounted the greatest ensured that none of the disciples would perform such a menial function with respect to his fellow disciples. It is not difficult to imagine the scene. Each knowing what was necessary, but each unwilling to take on the role of the servant. Each being of the opinion that another disciple should take on the task. James perhaps thinking to himself, why doesn't Thomas do the right thing and perform the role of the servant and wash everyone's feet? At the same time, Thomas thinking, why doesn't James do what is necessary?

As a result, the disciples entered the upper room, and reclined about the table, ready to eat, with their feet unwashed. They preferred to eat with unwashed feet, than to do anything that might be interpreted as a concession to their fellow disciples regarding who was the greatest among them! To have been requested to undertake some great and mighty task would have been acceptable. But they were not willing to wash the filthy feet of their fellow disciples. Their pride and the seeking of self would not allow it. That was the function of a servant!

It was at this juncture that Jesus, without saying anything, arose from the table and removed His outer coat. He then took a pitcher or jug of water, a towel and a basin and proceeded to stoop down and wash the feet of each one of the disciples. Having washed and dried the feet of one, He moved to the next. The upper room filled with silence. You can imagine the awkwardness that Jesus's actions would have engendered among the disciples. A powerful rebuke, but not a word spoken!

The force of the rebuke became clear when Jesus approached Simon Peter. Peter could not restrain himself. The incongruity of what was taking place compelled Peter to speak. He could not allow his Lord and master to perform such a menial task for him. "Lord, dost thou wash my feet?" Referring to the spiritual washing that He would accomplish at the cross, Jesus responds, "What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter." With typical boldness, Peter declares, "Thou shalt never wash my feet." Peter's conscience would not allow it! The rest of the disciples might allow Jesus to perform the role of a servant with respect to them, but he would not. But then Jesus responds, "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me." Peter had really no idea what Jesus was saying, but the thought that he would have no part with Jesus was anathema to him. Hearing, but not understanding, Peter does a complete about-face, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head."

Having washed the feet of each disciple, Jesus then put on His outer garment again and sits down with His disciples. His stunning visual rebuke had ended. He then asked the disciples, "Know ye what I have done to you?" In one sense they did. They knew that their Lord had washed their feet. But the truth was that they did not yet appreciate the full import of what was signified by the washing of their feet. In the next few hours, they would be confronted with the suffering Servant of Jehovah; the Servant appointed by the triune God to save His people of God; the Servant who would willingly subject Himself to the cursed and disgraceful death of the cross. They would behold the real Passover Lamb.

Jesus's action in washing the feet of His disciples was not designed simply to rebuke them for their pride. Clearly, His actions did that. However, His actions were also crafted to positively set forth the relationship that needed to exist between them as His disciples. Jesus here called His disciples to humility, love and willing service. He taught them by His own conduct that they ought to be willing to condescend to the most humble of tasks for the benefit of others. They ought not to be proud and high-minded, unwilling to occupy a low place, but to be willing to serve one another. Out of love, befriending and serving one another, even if that required the performance of the most menial of tasks.

This was an important lesson for these men who would be instrumental in the establishment of the New Testament church. It is a lesson that is vital to the well-being and spiritual health of the church of Jesus Christ today. Jesus drove His point home: "For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you." In pursuit of His point, He observed that His disciples addressed Him as "Master" (teacher) and "Lord" (one who rules and to whom honour is due). "Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am." They rightly addressed Him as "Master" and "Lord."

He then continued to extrapolate from how they addressed Him. "If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet." If I, who am your Lord and master, have performed the menial task of washing your feet, what does that mean for you? It means that you ought to also be willing to wash one another's feet. You ought to follow my example and to imitate me. "Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord." For the servant to be greater than his lord would amount to the destruction of the very nature of the relationship of lord and servant. If the servant were greater than his lord, he would be the lord and not the servant!

Jesus fortifies His argument even further when He says, "neither [is] he that is sent greater than he that sent him." The one who has been sent is not greater than the one who has sent him. The one who sends gives the instructions. He directs the one sent. Jesus says to His disciples, "I am the one who sends." "You are the ones who are sent." Therefore, just

have humbled myself before you, so you ought to humble yourselves before others.

Was Jesus calling upon His disciples, both then and now, to literally wash one another's feet? Was this event to become a perpetual ordinance in the New Testament church? The Church of Rome thinks so. That is why, on the Thursday before Easter, commonly called Maundy Thursday, the Pope of Rome washes the feet of twelve of his cardinals. But Rome's interpretation misses the point.

Jesus' washing of His disciples' feet was a single act of service, representing all other acts of service. Jesus was teaching His disciples about relationships. He was calling upon them to be those who, in whatever circumstances, willingly rendered service to others. To humble ourselves with respect to one another. And so out of love, to be willing to perform the role of the servant, as illustrated by His washing of their feet.

This was the life of Jesus Christ Himself. It was His life not just in the upper room. At the cross, He washed the filthy feet of every one of His disciples. He washed away the filth of our sins in His own blood; an extraordinary act of humility and sacrificial service. This He did out of love. Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end. (John 13:1)

Is it too much to ask that we might follow His example? We are not greater than our Lord, are we? As disciples of Jesus Christ, we must be willing to render to each other whatever service is needful, no matter how lowly and menial the task. Instead of becoming puffed up in our own pride, the true disciple will humble himself and seek to serve his brethren. The washing of one another's feet applies to every relationship in the church of Jesus Christ. It speaks to the minister of the gospel; it speaks to the elder and to the deacon; to the member and the adherent.

Does this come naturally to us? It didn't come naturally to the disciples, nor does it come naturally to us. Jesus' disciples were more concerned about their position and status. Left to themselves, they would have sat around the Passover table with their filthy feet, looking at each other and hoping that someone else would undertake the necessary, but humbling task of foot washing. Without the grace of God, we will not follow this example of our Saviour. By nature, we are proud, self-seeking individuals, pre-occupied with our own interests and wants, to the exclusion of others. But if we have been washed spiritually in the blood of Jesus Christ then we will, out of love for our Master and Lord, wash the feet of our fellow saints.

“If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.” Contrary to what we might think, genuine happiness and contentment flows from fulfilling the role of a servant with respect to others. There is a joy and satisfaction that comes from being used in a very practical, though menial way, in the service of God's kingdom. Those blessings are not usually tangible; nonetheless, they are rich. They give our lives, meaning and purpose.

As we will wash one another's feet, we will know and experience the strengthening of spiritual ties in Jesus Christ; the development and maturation of love and friendship for one another; and a closeness and warmth in our relationships with the Lord's people. There will be substance and meaning in all our relationships. We will know and experience relief from the tension and strife that comes from the pursuit of greatness. Instead, we will experience contentment with our function and place in the kingdom of God. Being enabled to serve the Lord with the gifts and talents that He has given to us. We will be relieved of the fear and worry, that in some measure, our gifts and talents are inferior to others. We will be enabled to acknowledge the gifts of others and delight in them. Let us humble ourselves, let us imitate our Lord and master, and let us wash one another's feet. It is the way of genuine happiness.

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