

Jesus Washes His Disciples' Feet

John 13:1-17

Warm-Up Question: The weekly Shabbat (Sabbath) meal in the home of a traditional Jewish family is a major event. When is your favorite time to gather together as a family, and what do you look forward to most?

¹It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ²The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. ³Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; ⁴so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. ⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." ⁹"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" ¹⁰Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." ¹¹For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean. ¹²When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them (John 13:1-17).

Setting the Scene

It is the evening of the Last Supper and Jesus is contemplating His death as He takes this last sacred meal with His closest friends. As the darkness begins to envelope him, His heart must have been full of many things that He wanted to impart to them before leaving this earth. We see Him attempting to prepare these men for what He knows will soon be a startling horror for them. He knows that His hour has come. Within fifteen hours He would be crucified. The next five chapters of John's gospel take in the last hours that Jesus will spend with them before his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Let's try to get a picture in our minds of how the room looked. When people think of the Last Supper, they usually recollect the famous painting by Leonardo Da Vinci. It has become perhaps his most famous work, due to the fact that nearly everyone has seen a reproduction of it somewhere. The popularity of the painting comes from the fact that it

was different from the typical paintings of the day. Leonardo wanted to display the human expressions of each disciple at the moment after Jesus announced that one of them would betray Him. This is why He painted them in a straight line. The perspective of the painting appears to be an extension of the room in which it was painted, as it was painted in the refectory of a chapel, where food was served. Looking at the painting, the eye is invariably drawn to the head of Christ at the center. Although it is a beautiful painting, it does not portray the event, as it would have appeared, according to what we know about the culture of the day. Many details differ, for example, how this Passover Seder, the Jewish ceremonial dinner for the first night or first two nights of Passover, would have been served and the typical arrangements around the table. We need to totally erase the image of this famous picture from our minds if we are to imagine how this room really appeared on that solemn night. Jesus and the twelve disciples arrived to a large upper room already prepared by John and Peter (Luke 22:8). We are told in Luke's Gospel that the disciples reclined around a U shaped table called a Triclinium (Luke 22:14). Three tables were put together forming a U shape, traditionally around 18 inches off of the ground. The disciples probably sat low to the ground on cushions or a low recliner. They would have been leaning on one arm, which left their other hand free to reach for food on the table. Sitting in such a way, a man's head was literally on the chest of the person reclining to his left.

Placed on the table we would have found an entire meal, not just bread and wine. Of course, since we were not there, we cannot know exactly what Jesus and his disciples shared that night. There is controversy among Biblical scholars about whether or not this was the traditional Passover Seder meal or an ordinary Jewish meal. Personally, I believe that this would have been the Passover meal, as Jesus and his disciples did keep the Jewish traditional feasts, and careful preparation was made for this meal, signifying that it was a special meal. It is also important to note that Jesus draws similarities between the bread and the wine as symbolic of his body and blood in the same way that symbolism is used in the Passover meal for instruction and remembrance. If this was a Passover meal, and I believe it was, then it is likely that the spread of food would have contained a plate with a stack of three matzot, (thin pieces of unleavened bread). We would have also found other food on the traditional Passover plate (ke'ara) including six items that had special significance to the people of God and served to remind them of the harsh life that they had in Egypt before God's deliverance from the house of slavery (Exodus 13:3). These items were:

1. & 2. Maror and Chazeret: Two types of bitter herbs, symbolizing the bitterness and harshness of the slavery, which the Jews endured in Ancient Egypt. For Maror, many people use freshly grated horseradish or whole horseradish root. Chazeret is typically romaine lettuce, whose roots are bitter tasting. Either the horseradish or romaine lettuce may be eaten in fulfillment of the mitzvah of eating bitter herbs during the Seder.
3. Charoset: A sweet, brown, pebbly paste of fruits and nuts, representing the mortar used by the Jewish slaves to build the storehouses of Egypt.
4. Karpas: A vegetable other than bitter herbs, usually parsley but sometimes something such as celery or cooked potato, which is dipped into salt water

(Ashkenazi custom), vinegar (Sephardi custom), or charoset (older custom, still common among Yemenite Jews) at the beginning of the Seder.

5. Zeroa: A roasted lamb shank, symbolizing the korban Pesach (Pesach sacrifice), which was a lamb offered in the Temple in Jerusalem and was then roasted and eaten as part of the meal on Seder night.

6. Beitzah: A roasted egg, symbolizing the korban chagigah (festival sacrifice) that was offered in the Temple in Jerusalem and was then eaten as part of the meal on Seder night."¹

For each person at the table, there was also an earthenware cup that was filled up, some say, with pure grape juice, others say that it was wine. The significant point here is that it was the fruit of the vine. Each person would drink from the cup at four separate times during the meal. This night was a special annual occasion, so it took some preparation on the part of the Jewish families. The mother of the family would spend the whole week before the Passover meal cleaning the house, being meticulous in removing every scrap or crumb of bread that had leaven (yeast) in it. The head of the family of Orthodox Jews still pray this prayer before the meal, "All leaven that is in my possession, that which I have seen and that which I have not seen, be it null, be it accounted as the dust of the earth." Often a little game is played with the children, by hiding just a small piece of bread. The mother will then tell the child where the last piece is left so the child can find it and burn it on the fire. The ritual of removing the leaven from the house was an important part of the celebration of Passover. The lesson would have been very familiar to them when Jesus warned his disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees, referring to their teaching. So we see that leaven was symbolic of sin and all that was not wholesome or truthful. This is what Paul the apostle is referring to when he writes:

⁶Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? ⁷Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ⁸Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (1 Corinthians 5:6-8).

The leaven, or yeast, speaks of sin, that which is corrupting to our spirit. Yeast is a fungus that inflates the bread. The dough is aerated by the action of the yeast. It is a picture of a man being puffed up by his own ego, thinking himself something when he is nothing. We are to get rid of our pride and self-sufficiency and be transparent and sincere before our God.

Those outside of Jerusalem had to come at least a week in advance, because anyone coming from a country outside of Israel could not worship in the Temple before undergoing seven days of ritual purification.² This is why the rulers of the Jews, when accusing Jesus before Pilate, would not enter the Roman Procurator's dwelling. To enter the home of a Gentile would require them again to go through the ritual purification in

¹ Taken from: <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20100402112845AAHWvRv>

² Christ in the Passover, Ceil and Moishe Rosen, Printed by Moody Press, Page 42.

order to eat the Passover (John 18:28).

The streets of Jerusalem, as well as other ancient cities of the time, had no pavements. Walking from one place to another, therefore, was a messy business. Shoes consisted of straps of leather that were tied around the feet with thongs. John records that John the Baptist did not consider himself worthy to even untie the thongs of the sandals that Christ wore (John 1:27). The dirt and mud would get in between the toes and would require a foot washing upon entry into each household. To this end, large earthenware or stone containers with many gallons of water were placed near the entrance for the ritual hand washing and foot bathing. The six stone jars full of water, each containing twenty to thirty gallons (John 2:6), that Jesus turned into wine at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee may have been jars like that which were used for hand and foot washing upon entry into the wedding. (This gives a whole new perspective to the story, as Jesus would have essentially been turning bath water into wine!) A servant usually did the washing as each person arrived. Some Jews believed that only Gentile slaves, not Jewish ones, should do the foot washing since the task was so menial. It seems that Jesus had either dismissed the slaves or possibly none were available. Whatever the case, we see that as each of the disciples arrived, none washed their feet, choosing instead to begin reclining around the table with their unwashed feet.

During this evening, which Jesus knew to be his last to spend with them, a dispute arose around the table as to which of the disciples was considered the greatest:

²⁴A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. ²⁵Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. ²⁶But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. ²⁷For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? (Luke 22:24-27).

Luke does not mention the washing of the feet, John is the only one who talks about this act of servant-hood, but it is likely that this was the time when Jesus got up from the table and began to model servant leadership for them.

Servant Leadership Exemplified

I think the room went quiet as Jesus got up from his position at the table and began to take off his outer garment. I’m sure the disciples wondered what on earth he was up to by stripping down, laying aside his tasseled prayer garment until he looked the part of a Gentile servant. When He walked over to the entrance to the door, wrapped a towel around Him, and filled a basin with water, they must have been very puzzled, wondering what He was up to! Jesus was teaching them in the most graphic and memorable way possible by his example. He knew that this would be a very necessary lesson for them, and He wanted it to be vivid in their minds.

Look at verses 3 and 4 of John 13. They are linked together by the word “so”. What is significant about verse 3 being linked to verse 4?

When a man or woman of God knows who he or she is in Christ, and what Christ has done for him, he is free from having to please his self-nature—his ego. When we truly understand that we are sons and daughters of the Living God, bought by His precious blood (Revelation 5:9), we are empowered to stoop low to any task that God puts before us. We lose the desire to please self out of love for Christ. Nothing becomes too menial for us to do for Christ when we know who we are, our position in Christ, and what He has done for us. We can look in the mirror with a healthy self-image and remind ourselves that we might not be rich in this world, but there is coming a Day when we will receive the reward of servants of the Living God. There is a healthy self-respect for even the poorest person who really understands what it means to be a child of God through faith in what Christ has accomplished for us on the cross. It was one of His final lessons He left us while He was on earth. It was important to Jesus that His followers would serve one another, and also that they would understand how they were clean by the word He had spoken to them. He was powerfully illustrating a truth that would lead them through the days ahead.

It is clear from verse 10 that Judas was still in the room as Jesus began washing the disciple’s feet. What then is John referring to when he says that the devil had already prompted Judas to betray Jesus?

As John writes about the events of that night, he ponders on the fact that He saw Christ wash Judas’ feet. He finds out about the deal made between Judas and the Jewish religious leaders after the fact, and finds it remarkable that Jesus knew about the deal and still washed Judas’ feet. Luke testifies in his gospel that the deal had gone down before they sat down for the Passover meal:

¹Now the Festival of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, **was approaching**,
²and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some way to get rid of Jesus, for they were afraid of the people. ³Then **Satan entered Judas**, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve. ⁴And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. ⁵They were delighted and agreed to give him money. ⁶He consented, **and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them** when no crowd was present (Luke 22:1-6).

Why do you think Peter is reluctant to allow Jesus to wash his feet?

Have you ever had someone wash your feet in a foot-washing ceremony? It is a humbling experience and is certainly uncomfortable, especially for a proud heart! Peter resisted this act, which demonstrated the humility of Jesus. How could the Master he loved wash his feet? That was something that only a servant would do! In the Greek language, the words “you” and “my” are together for emphasis. Peter is obviously incredulous at the thought. It should be read; “You mean *you...my* feet!” He says in verse

eight, “you shall never wash my feet!” This is still the pride of the fleshly nature rising up within Peter. It is his self-assertive pride that did not want to accept that type of servant act. If he had dirty feet, he would wash them himself, thank you! It was abhorrent for Peter to think of his master washing his feet. We all have to be careful when our thoughts are contrary to what the Lord wants to teach us. His ways are not our ways. Often God’s way of doing things will go against the grain of our nature. We prefer to do things apart from God’s help, our own way. Learn how to recognize those thoughts and when God gives you a teachable moment, be aware and open to what the Spirit wants to teach you! If we don’t we may miss out on important truths He wishes to reveal to us.

Jesus responds that Peter would understand at a later point what He was doing by washing his feet. What do you think Peter would understand at a later date? What did He mean by saying, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me?” (John 13:8).

The Two Washings

First of all there is the washing in water, the bathing of our whole nature that is symbolic of the spiritual cleansing of the cross of Christ. When a man would approach God, he had to approach by way of the sacrificial altar. There had to be a substitutionary lamb that was sacrificed on behalf of the man who would approach. Without the shedding of blood there could be no approaching God:

²²In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (Hebrews 9:22).

¹¹For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life (Leviticus 17:11).

The altar speaks of the washing of cleansing by blood—the whole person needs to be cleansed. Jesus made it clear to Peter, unless the blood of my sacrifice on Calvary’s tree washes you clean, you have no part with me. There can be no approach to a Holy God unless the sacrifice of Calvary has been imputed (possessed by someone for their account) to pardon them from sin.

“Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean” (John 13:10).

What is the point that Jesus is making by saying that only Peter’s feet need to be washed and not his whole body?

Before a priest could enter into the Holy Place, the outer room of the Temple itself, he had to wash his hands and feet at the bronze laver or basin.

⁸They made the bronze basin and its bronze stand from the mirrors of the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting (Exodus 38:8).

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶to make her holy, **cleansing her by the washing with water through the word,** ²⁷and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless (Ephesians 5:25-27).

³You are already **clean because of the word** I have spoken to you (John 15:3).

The application of Christ's death on the cross comes to us through the Word of God. Through our receiving of the Word of God, we are cleansed. But we still have to live in this world, which is contrary to God. As we walk through this life, there will be occasions when we will sin. There are times when our feet (speaking of our daily walk) will get dirty. We must have our feet washed by confession of sin and walking in His forgiveness. Jesus said to His disciples that they were clean already because of the word that He had spoken to them. Because they had been with Christ, they had come to know Him and would shortly understand the reason for His death as a sacrifice for sin. They would recall His words and understand the reason for His death. They would also understand a deeper meaning in the foot washing He ceremoniously performed for them that night. I am sure they did so many times during their lives after He had left them, recalling their last night together and how he had served them in that simple way, and then later in the most sacrificial way that a person is capable of, the giving of His very life.

Jesus broke a "social norm" when he stooped to clean the disciple's feet. A social norm can be described as a rule or standard of behavior shared by members of a social group. Jesus was very good at breaking social norms.

Can you think of other instances in scripture where Jesus did this? As you think of each instance that comes to your mind, can you see a point that Jesus is demonstrating?

When Jesus challenged people by breaking through their social norms, he did so in order to make a point, to teach them something in a very visual way. How do we usually view people who do not regard social norms?

In 1818 one out of six women who had children died of something called "childbirth fever." A doctor's daily routine back then started in the dissecting room, where he performed autopsies, and from there he made his rounds to examine expectant mothers. No one even thought to wash his hands...at least not until a doctor named Ignaz Semmelweis began to practice strict hand washing. He was the very first doctor to associate a lack of hand washing with the huge fatality rate. Dr. Semmelweis only lost one in fifty, yet his colleagues laughed at him. Once he said, "Childbirth fever is caused by decomposed material conveyed to a wound...I have shown how it can be prevented. I have proven all that I've said. But while we talk, talk, talk, women are dying... I'm not asking for anything world shaking, only that you wash your hands." Yet virtually no one believed him.³

³ Timothy Peck. Citation: I John 1:9. http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/projects/cases/childbed_fever.htm

We see even in nature, how that disease can spread when there is no cleansing. Disease can lead to death if it is not stopped. Sin is also like a disease and will continue to spread unless it is stopped. Through Christ, cleansing is always available to us. There is a need for all of us who are Christians to spend time in confession of sin that we may walk through this life with a clear conscience before God and man. Whenever the Spirit shows us something that we said or did that was displeasing to Him, we are to confess it to God and ask for the Holy Spirit's help so that we can overcome the next time we are tempted to walk in sin. This way of living can be described as keeping in step with the Spirit. If we do this, we will be much more aware when God is speaking to us through the Holy Spirit and able to be taught by the Lord. If we do not, our hearts can become hardened through sin. This is part of the continuous cycle in the life of the dedicated disciple of Christ. The apostle John understood this, for he instructs believers:

⁸If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us (1 John 1:8-10).

Through Christ, we can know that we are cleansed from our sin and enjoy fellowship with God. He will purify us from ALL unrighteousness. The Holy Spirit is ready to lead you and keep you walking in the way He wants you to go. Your success does not depend on your own abilities. Your Christian life depends on Christ and His forgiveness. If you have sincerely called on the Lord to forgive you of your sin, He has already made you clean through His sacrifice, and He is ready to guide you and continually cleanse your walk as you learn to keep in step with Him.

Prayer: Father, thank you for your gracious provision of cleansing from sin. Help us to quickly respond to the voice of your Spirit. Thank you for stooping to serve us, even though you are the Lord of all! Let us find joy in serving others, alongside you. Amen!

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