

“A JOURNEY THROUGH THE GOSPEL OF JOHN” SERIES

#24: “Jesus Washes the Disciples’ Feet”

SCRIPTURE: John 13:1-20

INTRO:

None of the other three gospel writers record these parting instructions Jesus gave to His disciples while they were gathered for supper just days before the Passover and Jesus’ impending arrest, illegal trial, and execution. However, a comparison of John 13 with Mark 14, Matthew 26, and Luke 22 tells us that all three write about this “last supper” that Jesus shared with His disciples, even though they focus on and record different things.

We can see here that...

...IN SPITE OF THE PRESSURE OF HIS IMPENDING DEATH, JESUS HAD HIS DISCIPLES UPPERMOST IN HIS MIND.

These were the disciples who quarreled over who was to be first in the new kingdom. Among them was the one who had already made arrangements with the chief priests and Pharisees to betray Jesus.

But Jesus, out of His unconditional love for these twelve men – the “dirty dozen” – presented Himself to them as their servant and washed their feet – the feet of the impetuous Peter, those of that “rat” Judas, and those of the rest of the selfish bunch.

JESUS WASHED THEIR FEET.

What *was* this? What is it with this *feet-washing* thing? In Bible times foot washing was necessary because folks wore sandals, and they didn’t have paved roads. The sand and dust from the road would make for some pretty dirty feet. In fact, in those days the feet were considered to be the dirtiest part of the body.

So, one of the first things a person would do upon entering a tent or a house was the washing of the feet. Shoes or sandals were never worn in the house, especially in the upper rooms where the floors were often carpeted.

Those receiving guests would commonly provide water and towels and sometimes a servant to do the honors. It was considered “hospitality.”

It was also considered one of the lowest tasks a servant could perform, so it came to be a symbol of complete devotion when willingly performed. The untying of the strap of someone’s sandals was identified as the same as washing someone’s feet. John the Baptist commented that he was unworthy to untie the sandals on Jesus’ feet.

Why did Jesus wash His disciples’ feet? The short answer is that He did it to show them the humility with which He wanted them to live their lives and with which He wanted them to build His kingdom, the church.

A deeper answer may be discerned from what Jesus said to Peter when the impetuous disciple said, ***“You shall never wash my feet.”*** Jesus said, ***“If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.”*** In washing the disciples’ feet, Jesus was showing that God was making Himself available to His children in a most subservient way. He was showing the extent of God’s love and grace and His willingness to accept and forgive. And if we are not willing to show the same to others, we cannot be God-like – we cannot be saved.

Jesus said, after washing their feet, ***“Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him”*** (vv. 12-16).

There are those who believe that Jesus wants us to literally wash one another’s feet. For example, the denomination known as “The Church of God,” headquartered in Anderson, Indiana (the church of the Gaithers), teaches such and regularly has foot-washing times.

But to see Jesus' example as a command to wash one another's feet, I believe, misses the point of His act of servitude. So, what was His point?

First, consider the context. Jesus was nearing the end of His three years of teaching, and the twelve were arguing over who would be appointed to the highest "cabinet post" in the new kingdom. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, had approached Jesus, saying, "***Grant us to sit, one at your right and one at your left, in your glory***" (Mark 10:37). In His response to them, Jesus said, "***...whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many***" (Mark 10:43-45).

Out of this situation with the disciples came Jesus washing the disciples' feet, a menial task that set an unforgettable example of love and humility. This was to be the attitude of a follower of Christ – so loving and so willing to serve.

So, it isn't the act of washing feet but the love and humility that motivates the act that Jesus is wanting His disciples to manifest. You and I could wash one another's feet and not truly exemplify love and humility, but we could do it by various acts meaningful for our times.

A blogger from First Christian Church in Canton, Ohio has suggested:

"For one thing, there are the caregivers. Parents bathe their young children, no matter what they may have gotten themselves into. Others care for family members who aren't able to tend to themselves, whether because of illness, special needs, or the toll of age. Yet others care for those who aren't related to them, working in home care, hospices, or assisted living facilities.

"There are also the people who work behind the scenes, so that others can enjoy a "civilized" life. The hard worker who vacuums the carpets of a church may never get a place in the Sunday bulletin. Christians take communion on a regular basis without knowing who prepared it. A clean restroom in a church can make a

positive impact on a visitor, but the process of keeping a bathroom clean isn't elegant.

“And there are those who leave comfortable houses, cities, and even countries, going to where the water isn't always clean (or where there isn't even indoor plumbing) to spread the news of Jesus. Entire families have uprooted from relatives and friends, to go to a place where they may not yet speak the language, and where cultural traditions are foreign to them, because the souls in this new land are loved – both by these messengers, and by God – enough to receive the message of salvation” (What Does Foot-Washing Look Like Today?).

Let's take another listen to what Peter says:

“YOU'RE NOT WASHING MY FEET!”

How many among us would have reacted similarly? Several of us, I'll bet.

Why would Peter say this? I think he said it because his mental picture of the new kingdom was carnal – strictly earthly – not spiritual. So, he simply reacted the way he did, not thinking about a spiritual kingdom where love, honor, and service take precedence over rank, status, or seniority.

And notice how quickly Peter goes to the opposite extreme: ***“Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”*** In other words, he thought, “If being washed guarantees me a place in the kingdom, wash me all over!”

Butler explains: “What Jesus is trying to get the impetuous Peter to see is that once a man has become a devoted and faithful follower of His by an initial cleansing and sanctifying call, the new disciple must then grow in his spiritual comprehension of Christ's will and work. The disciples (all except one who was a hypocrite) had in all sincerity and honest desire answered His call to discipleship. They needed to grow in humility and love for one another even to the extent that they would willingly perform the lowliest services for one another. Every disciple of Christ must see the need for daily ‘washing of the feet.’ It is a daily task, this

cleansing, by renewing the mind [Romans 12:1-2; 2 Corinthians 4:16; Colossians 3:1-170]" (p. 217).

IN CLOSING...

Do you understand the lesson here? Whose feet do *you* wash? Who do you serve? What daily act of spiritual cleansing do you do?