

## Why Jesus Washed Their Feet

HN/SS 29/01/06 am

Reading: Psalm 51, John 13

Study Text: John 13:6-17

Sing Psalms:

Jesus was reclining with his disciples around the table at the Passover supper. Their feet were unwashed. The basin was there in the corner with water and a towel. But who was going to humble himself and perform this menial task, a task usually falling to a servant. It was Jesus, their Teacher and Lord, who in true humility and self-effacing love stooped down to wash their feet. Afterwards he told them, *I have given you an example that you should do as I have done to you* (13:15).

Did he mean that they must literally wash one another's feet? Was he instituting a ritual to be taken up in the church? Some think so. They conduct foot washing ceremonies, with the Pope or other dignitary literally washing the feet of some poor people brought in for the occasion. But such a performance can detract from the actual lesson which Jesus was conveying. He was not parading his humility as if to say 'look at me I am more humble than anyone else'. He was demonstrating the profound love he had for these men. *Having loved his own...he loved them to the end* (13:1). He called not for a show of humility, but for a life of true love for one another.

Yet there is more to this foot washing than simply Jesus setting an example of love for his disciples to follow. We learn this from the words which Jesus spoke in response to Peter. Peter initially protested vehemently – *you shall never wash my feet* – but in the next breath was calling for Jesus to wash him all over. This is impetuous Peter at his best – or should we say worst! He was speaking things he did not understand. Jesus gently told him he would not understand just now but would do so afterwards (13:7). Presumably he meant after his death and resurrection or maybe at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was given.

### Washing the Heart

Peter's blunt refusal to let Jesus wash his feet drew a blunt reply from Jesus – *if I do not wash you, you have not part with me* (13:8). What did Jesus mean by these words? Peter, like all those present, was embarrassed by what Jesus was doing. He did not want to be shamed in this way – until Jesus said this. Peter was obviously struck by what Jesus said, for his whole attitude changed.

Was Peter afraid of being excluded from the meal? This was the Passover supper at which they were remembering the mighty deliverance from Egypt. The blood of the lamb was put on the doorposts behind which they ate the Passover meal. Those who did not take part in the Passover suffered when the angel of death passed through the land.

Peter did not want to be separated from Jesus. He had been with him for some three years. Jesus had earlier asked him; *do you want to leave also?* Peter answered saying *Lord to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know you are the Christ, the Son of the living God* (6:68, 69). Peter believed in Jesus and wanted to

remain with him. The thought of being separated from Jesus horrified him; hence his desperate plea – *not my feet only, but my hands and my head.*

*If I do not wash you, you have no part with me.* Peter would soon understand, as I trust you do, that Jesus was referring to more than physical washing – he was speaking of spiritual washing. He meant washing of the soul not just the body. It was not dirt on the body that Jesus was concerned about but dirt upon Peter's heart.

Sin makes us unclean. Sin separates us from God. *We are all like an unclean thing and all our righteousness's are like filthy rags/garments* said the prophet (Isaiah 64:6). Sin is not just the terrible things that wicked people do. All your good works are like filthy rags said Isaiah.

It is as if you are wearing dusty clothes and your hands are all greasy. When you try to wipe the dirt off what happens? You cannot wipe or wash yourself clean no matter how hard or how sincerely you try. You can claim you are not as dirty as the next person but that still does not make you clean. The dirt sticks and it keeps on sticking – and indeed stinking in the nostrils of the holy God.

*If I do not wash you, you have not part with me.* King David knew this. When he sinned he tried all he could to cover it up – and as king he do a lot! But the sin stuck to him, it stuck to his heart and he had not peace. He feared being cast away from the presence of the Lord. Finally he cried out to the Lord – *purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean, wash me and I shall be whiter than snow* (Psalm 51:7). He knew that only with a clean heart could he come into the presence of the Lord and that only God could cleanse him from sin; only God could give him a clean heart.

Peter was more than ready to be washed by Jesus when told that this was essential for him to be 'part with Jesus'. What does being part with Jesus mean? We are familiar with the idea of being part of a family. We enjoy fellowship and blessings and also have an inheritance when we are part of the family. So it is with Jesus. Being 'in Christ' we have an eternal home with Jesus (14:1-4). This inheritance is vitally linked to Christ. Peter understood this in some way. What about you. Are you 'in Christ' and sure of your inheritance in him?

It was not of course this washing with water that was cleansing Peter of his sin – anymore than washing or sprinkling with water in baptism cleanses our hearts from sin. 'What can wash away my sin, nothing but the blood of Jesus?' This foot washing then was a sign pointing to the Cross, to the blood of Christ that alone can cleanse our hearts from sin (I John 1:7). *How much more shall the blood of Christ who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God* (Hebrews 9:14).

You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus (I Corinthians 6:11). Are these words true of you? Do you know that perfect, present cleansing in the blood of Christ? Repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Then and only then will you be cleansed, and clothed in the very righteousness of Christ, making you acceptable in the presence of the Lord.

## Not All Clean

Peter's protest at being washed by Jesus turned to an exuberant plea for Jesus to wash not only his feet but his head and his hands. Jesus' reply at this point is not easy to understand at least at the spiritual level. And then another level is added with the word 'complete' taking on a new meaning. The inspired gospel writer tells us that when Jesus said *you are clean but not all of you*, he was referring to Judas who would betray him (13:11).

In a brief moment alone with his disciples before this, Jesus told them that one of the twelve was a devil who would betray him (6:70). Knowing this, Jesus still washed Judas – physically but certainly not spiritually. Remember that pouring water on the body in baptism does not cleanse the heart of anyone. How Jesus could wash the feet of a man, knowing he would betray him to death, is beyond our comprehension. But then again, while we were still sinners and enemies of Christ, he died for us (Romans 5:8).

*He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet* said Jesus. Physically of course it was only Peter's feet that had become dirty from walking on the dusty road. He had taken a bath so the rest of him was clean. You may know that in Britain it is not common to take a bath every day. Only the feet need to be washed before going to bed – well that was it was like when I was child anyway, and that was here in this country. And we took a bath in a couple of inches of water when water was scarce.

If this washing by Jesus points to spiritual washing as has already been shown, what did Jesus mean by this reply? Here is 'a great practical truth' that ought to be 'carefully noted and treasured by all believers' writes Ryle. He goes on 'once joined to Christ and cleansed by his blood they are completely absolved and free from all spot of guilt and are counted without blame before God. But for all this they need every day as they walk through this world to confess their daily failures and sue (ask) for daily pardon'.

Peter confessed and believed in Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God (6:69). He had been cleansed; he was justified before God. But as he continued living in this world he was subject to sin and so needed ongoing washing from sin – in the process called sanctification. *I write to you that you may not sin, but if anyone sins we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous* (I John 2:1).

There is no perfectionism here. If you come across someone teaching such a doctrine, then tell them to read this passage and also I John 1:8. At the same time there is no incomplete justification here; no faith plus something else. Jesus himself said 'one who has bathed *is completely clean*'. You have no need and indeed cannot be cleansed a second time.

We have been justified by grace through faith. We are being sanctified as we live each day in this world. The first is a declaration and the second a process. Both are the work of God, both are cleansing from sin through the shed blood of Jesus Christ our Lord that we might be one with Christ and obtain our eternal inheritance in him.

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