

Another Look At Footwashing

by Bill Keesee (1935-2010)

Forerunner, February 2002

In the thirteenth chapter of his gospel, the apostle John records a ceremony that Christ performed and instituted on the very last night of His life. It may at first seem strange that the other three gospel writers did not address this act at all in their biographies of Jesus' life and ministry, but upon closer examination, it makes perfect sense why God chose John to record it. The footwashing ceremony is at its root an act of love, and who better to describe it than "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 21: 7, 20; 13:23; 19:26; 20:2)?

As we have so often been taught, washing another's feet is an act of humility when we perform it as Christ instructs us. While it indeed should be done with a humble attitude, after a more intensive study of Christ's instructions concerning it, we will find a deeper and more meaningful reason why it is so vital that we do it with a correct understanding. This deeper meaning will help us realize how important Christ's example is to us today.

At first, it may also seem strange that, while the other three gospel writers focus on the bread and wine that Christ instituted that same evening—and make no mention of footwashing—John does just the opposite. We must remember that John, as the last of the gospel writers, fills in some of Jesus' acts and statements that the others left out of their gospels. The answer could be as simple as that John felt that the footwashing ceremony needed to be included in the New Testament canon. On the other hand, John probably recognized the direct connection between footwashing and the awesome work of Christ in His life, death, and afterlife.

The footwashing ceremony, recorded in John 13:1-17, allows us a window into the character of our Savior. When we apply the lessons of this unique and instructive ritual in our lives, it gives us a better understanding of why some people struggle to find happiness yet never fully achieve it, and why others are brimful and running over with joy.

Master = Servant

Immediately upon reading the account, we notice that Christ performs a menial task generally done by the lowliest servant in the household. Jesus says of this in verses 13-15:

You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, 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 should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him.

This last statement by Jesus gives us a little insight into His mind. What He says can apply both to earthly relationships of masters and servants as well as to a human's relationship to Christ. We can see in the pages of the gospels that it also describes how Jesus approached His relationship with God the Father. He was always submissive to the Father in everything. Beyond this, God the Father is the greatest servant in the universe. In our behalf, He sustains everything we depend on for our very lives.

Luke probably alludes to the same statement in his account of that Passover evening:

But there was also rivalry among [the disciples], as to which of them should be considered the greatest. And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called 'benefactors.' But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves."

Christ, by His actions, made it very clear that He would not expect anything from us that He was not willing to do Himself. He, as our Governor and Elder Brother, though He should have been served by others, served them. Undoubtedly, service is the essence of godly leadership.

Washed Clean

Notice Peter's objection in John 13:6: "Then He came to Simon Peter. And Peter said to Him, 'Lord, are You washing my feet?'" The translation does not do Peter's reaction justice. Kenneth N. Taylor, in his *Living Gospels: The Paraphrased Gospels*, puts it this way: "Master, You shouldn't be washing our feet like this!" Christ responds, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this" (verse 7).

Peter, still not convinced, flatly states, "You shall never wash my feet" (verse 8). Christ's next words, however, finally cause him to give in: "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." Jesus' response—whatever His tone of voice—struck the disciple squarely between the eyes: Peter's eternal life was on the line! This time, his response is quite different: "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!" (verse 9). This sounds a little like Psalm 51:2, where David prays, "Wash me thoroughly. . . ."

Our Savior's answer to this request is not what some would expect: "He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean" (John 13:10). The New International Version's translation of this verse makes His thought clear: "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean." Obviously, the disciples had bathed before coming to eat the Passover meal. But having to walk along dusty roads in sandals, they collected a small amount of dirt on their feet. Thus, Christ explains that to be perfectly clean again, all He needed to do was to wash their feet.

Upon repentance, baptism, and receiving God's Holy Spirit, we are at that point perfectly clean in God's eyes. The blood of Jesus Christ has symbolically washed away all our past sins, and we stand before Him completely sinless. We have been buried in the waters of baptism and resurrected to a new life. However, as we all know, our human nature has certainly not departed from us, and it is not very long until the fact that we have sinned again stares us in the face. The old self has not really gone away; our lives are much as they were—with some important exceptions: We now have the Holy Spirit and have been given God's grace.

Having been regenerated by God through His Spirit that He has given us, we have entered a unique relationship with God the Father. The veil that once separated us from having access to Him has been torn away by the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ (Matthew 27:51; Hebrews 6:19-

20; 10:19-22). Through Him, we can communicate with the Father to seek mercy and forgiveness for our sins and weaknesses. Upon repentance, God applies again the sacrifice of Christ to us and forgives us by His grace.

Now we can see that, even though we were once washed completely clean at baptism, we will occasionally sin as we walk through this life. We will spiritually get our feet dirty, and we will need Christ to wash our feet to make us completely clean again. Thus, He tells Peter, if He did not wash his feet, he would have no part with Him. None of us can carry unforgiven sins and still remain part of the body of Christ. This points out why it is so imperative that we seek His mercy and help to repent each day. When we do this, He can symbolically wash our feet and make us clean again. Each year at the Passover service, we reenact this to remind us how important it is.

Washing Others' Feet

In John 13:14, Christ says, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." The common explanation for this is that it teaches us to learn humility by doing good for others, by doing acts of service or kindness for our brethren. This is certainly a good lesson that we can take from Christ's example, but we can perhaps derive another from it.

In John's account, what did Jesus suggest that the washing of feet symbolized? He tells Peter that the washing of his feet symbolizes forgiveness of his sin to return him to a "clean" relationship with God. It is only logical to deduce that God expects nothing less from us in response to the sins of our brethren. In the section of the Sermon on the Mount on prayer, Jesus says: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15).

No doubt, God puts a very great emphasis on our relationships since our lives are to reflect His character. If we have begun to "put on Christ" (Galatians 3:27), would we be a good example of His love for us if we held grudges, hated our brother, or would not forgive another? Obviously, no. Putting on Christ demands that we "put off" these carnal destroyers of relationships and replace them with Christian virtues.

Peter asks Christ, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" (Matthew 18:21). Christ's answer should give us a clue to how He feels about this issue. Peter had ventured a number he thought would be sufficient to establish his forbearance. Christ, though, pulls out all the stops, telling him that there is no set limit: "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven" (verse 22). We are indeed fortunate and can be thankful that same unlimited forgiveness applies to us when we need God's mercy.

The following verses, Matthew 18:23-35, is the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. The servant was deeply in debt to his master, and when he sought relief, his master forgave him his gargantuan debt. Then the tables turn. Another man owed him a small amount and could not repay it. Instead of following his master's example, the servant forgot the mercy he had just received and had the man thrown into prison!

Verses 34-35 sum up the story: "And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So My heavenly Father will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses." The language Christ uses leaves little room for exclusions. He Himself, in the agony of crucifixion, says without reservation, "Father, forgive them,

for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). His plea applies, not only to those who cried out for His death and nailed Him to the stake, but to all, past and future, who would be just as responsible as they were and need God's forgiveness. That includes everybody.

"Happy Are You . . ."

Finally, we must notice John 13:17, where Jesus concludes His comments on footwashing: "If you know these things, happy are you if you do them." Observe that His emphasis is on their application, not on whether we know about them or even understand them.

In this verse, Christ makes a very positive statement: We *will* be happy if we put this teaching into practice. He knew that grudges, hate, anger, and lack of forgiveness do nothing but shackle us and hinder our spiritual growth. If we let them hang around, they will eventually destroy us. Forgiving even those who have done things spitefully against us (Matthew 5:44) unlocks our shackles and releases us from feelings of animosity. When we rid ourselves of these burdens, we can find inner peace and true happiness.

If we can now see how much more meaningful the footwashing ceremony is, and how important it is that we emulate the example Christ set for us, then the Passover can have a greater impact this year. It shows the depth of Christ's love in making Himself a sacrifice for us so we could be forgiven of our sins. Remember, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends" (John 15:13), and Jesus Christ did just that for our forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life.

Think of these things during the next footwashing ceremony. It may still be humbling, but it should also make us happy that we are following the example of our Savior in serving one another by forgiving one another.