

25. Jesus Washes His Disciples' Feet

John 13:1-17

The Gospel According to John

It was the evening of the Last Supper, and the Lord Jesus took one last opportunity to share a sacred meal with His closest friends. As the darkness descended that evening, Christ prepared His disciples for what He knew would soon be a startling horror for them. His hour had come. When people know that death is approaching, they will often share thoughts that are very important to them. Within fifteen hours, He would be crucified. The next five chapters of John's Gospel focus on the last hours and essential thoughts that Jesus would share with the twelve disciples before His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane.

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 (John 13:1-2).

Passover Symbolism

Before we seek to understand the passage itself, let's try to get a picture of how the room looked that night. When people think of the Last Supper, they usually recollect the famous painting by Leonardo da Vinci. It has become, perhaps, his most renowned work since nearly everyone has seen a reproduction of it somewhere. The popularity of the picture comes from the fact that it was different from the typical portrayals 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. He painted them in a straight line so that we could see the expression on their faces. 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 Passover, would have been served and the typical arrangements around the table.

We need to entirely erase the image of this painting from our minds if we are to imagine how this room appeared on that solemn night. Jesus and the twelve disciples arrived at a large upper room already prepared by John and Peter (Luke 22:8), and Scripture says that it was the traditional Passover meal that they ate: "So they prepared the Passover. ¹⁴When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table" (Luke 22:13-14). The disciples reclined around a U-shaped table called a Triclinium. Three tables were put together forming a U-shape, traditionally around eighteen 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. Reclining on couches in such a way meant that each person's head was nearly 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 precisely 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. I believe that this would have been the Passover meal because, as Galileans, the Passover meal could be eaten the day before those in Judah. Careful preparation had been made for this meal. “Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, “Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover” (Luke 22:8). On the table, 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 Jewish people. These items 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 as follows:

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 with roots that 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, dipped into salt water (Ashkenazi custom), vinegar (Sephardi custom), or charoset (older tradition, still prevalent among Yemenite Jews) at the beginning of the Seder.
5. Zera: A roasted lamb shank, symbolizing the korban Pesach (Pesach sacrifice), which was a lamb offered in the Temple in Jerusalem and 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 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 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:

For seven days you are to eat bread made without yeast. On the first day remove the yeast from your houses, for whoever eats anything with yeast in it from the first day through the seventh must be cut off from Israel (Exodus 12:15).

The head of the family of Orthodox Jews still prays 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 with yeast in it. The mother will then tell the child where the last bit is left so that the child can find it and burn it on the fire.

The ritual of removing the leaven (yeast) from the house was an essential part of the celebration

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

of Passover, the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Question 1) What was the significance of removing leaven before the Passover meal? What did that have to do with the exodus from Egypt, and how does that relate to the believer in Christ?

On an earlier occasion, Jesus warned His disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees, referring to their prideful teaching. He warned that, if it found room in their hearts, it could spread and puff up the hearts of the disciples (Matthew 16:6). Leaven was symbolic of sin, and all that was not wholesome or truthful. Leaven or yeast is to what Paul the Apostle referred when he wrote:

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, which is corrupting to our spirit. Yeast is a fungus that inflates the bread. The action of the yeast aerates the dough. It is a picture of a man being puffed up by his 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.

When we come to Christ, we are to leave the world system behind and say no to servitude to Satan and his works. We are no longer habitually to allow the leaven of sin to rule over us. Christ, our Passover Lamb is sacrificed for us to have deliverance from Egypt, a picture of the world system. The blood of the lamb has been shed and put over the door of our house.

Luke adds to our understanding of the events that night as they reclined around the Passover meal. A dispute arose as to which of the disciples was 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).

Can you imagine what it was like for Jesus to sit around the table that night, listening to arguing and bickering as to who was the greatest of them? After having spent the last three years of His life with these men, imparting to them the ways of the kingdom of God, it must have pained Him to hear them arguing among themselves and striving for position. Luke does not mention the washing of the feet. John is the only one who talks about this act of servanthood, but it is likely that, while the argument was occurring, Jesus took this opportunity to teach them an object lesson. Jesus often used pictures and events as lessons to illustrate His teaching, and this would have been the ideal opportunity. We know that, sometime during the meal, He got up from the table and began to model servant leadership for them.

The Foot Washing

People from outside the nation 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 cleansing explains why the rulers of the Jews, when accusing Jesus before Pilate, would not enter the dwelling of Pontius Pilate, the Roman Procurator. To enter the home of a Gentile would require them to go through the ritual purification again to eat the Passover (John 18:28).

As well as other ancient cities of the time, the streets of Jerusalem had very little paving; therefore, walking from one place to another was a messy business, with shoes made of leather sandals tied around the feet with thongs. 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 near the entrance for the ritual hand washing and foot bathing. □

Each containing twenty to thirty gallons (John 2:6), the six stone jars full of water 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. A servant usually did the washing as each person arrived. Some Jews believed that only Gentile slaves, not Jewish people, should do the foot washing since the task was so menial. During the Passover meal Jesus shared with His friends, it is likely there were no servants 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 feet still dirty.

Servant Leadership Exemplified

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!" (John 13:3-9).

It is possible 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 He was planning by stripping off His cloak and 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. The Lord was teaching them most graphically by His example. He knew that this would be a vital lesson for them, and He wanted it

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

to be vivid in their minds. □

Question 2) Verses three and four are linked together by the word "so." What is John pointing out to us as he links these two thoughts together? Knowing His origin and His authority, how does Jesus relate to the menial task of service He chooses to undertake?

When men or women of God know who they are in Christ and what Christ has done for them, they are free from having to please their self-nature, i.e., their ego. When people truly understand that they are sons and daughters of the Living God, bought by His precious blood (Revelation 5:9), they are empowered to stoop low to any task that God puts before them. They can deny the desire to please self and put others first out of love for Christ.

Nothing becomes too menial for us to do for Christ when we know 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 the Day is coming when we will receive the reward of servants of the Living God. There is healthy self-respect for even the most unfortunate person in this world who understands what it means to be a child of God.

It was one of Christ's final lessons that He left us while He was on earth. It was necessary to Jesus that His followers would serve one another and, also, that they would understand how they were clean by the Word that He had spoken to them. He was powerfully illustrating a truth that would lead them through the days ahead.

Question 3) Why do you think Peter is reluctant to allow Jesus to wash his feet? What was it that Peter would understand at a later point by washing his feet? What did Jesus mean by saying, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me?" (John 13:8).

Have you ever had someone wash your feet in a foot-washing ceremony? It is a humbling experience and is, indeed, uncomfortable, especially for someone who is proud. Peter resisted this act, which demonstrated the humility of Jesus. How could the Master wash his feet? To Peter, it should have been the other way around. That kind of menial task was something that only a servant would do! In the Greek language, the words "you" and "my" are together for emphasis. Peter is incredulous at the thought. His response was; "You mean *you...my* feet!" He says in verse eight, "You shall never wash my feet!"

Self-assertive pride rose up within Peter at the thought of Jesus' washing his feet. This type of pride is the fleshly nature that we all have. If he had dirty feet, he would clean 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 human nature. We prefer to do things our way, apart from God's help. 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 you don't, you may miss out on essential truths God wants to reveal to you!

Bathing and Foot Washing

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 13:10-17).

As John wrote about the events of that night, he pondered on the fact that He saw Christ wash Judas’ feet (v. 10). At the time of his writing his Gospel (Around 90 A.D.), John had found out about the deal made between Judas and the Jewish religious leaders, and looking back, he thought it remarkable that Jesus knew about the betrayal, yet he still washed Judas’ feet. Luke testified in his Gospel that the deal went down before they sat down for the Passover meal (Luke 22:1-6).

The disciples later understood (v. 7) that, just as Jews arrived early in Jerusalem for the washing or ceremonial bathing in the water of the Mikveh before the feast, so Jesus would cleanse them thoroughly from sin by His sacrifice on the cross. This cleansing from sin was foreshadowed in the Old Testament Day of Atonement, a type of the sacrifice of Christ: “**Atonement will be made for you to cleanse you, and you will be clean from all your sins before the LORD**” (Leviticus 16:30). Paul’s letter to Titus also speaks of this washing:

He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through **the washing of rebirth** and renewal by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5)

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 come by way of the sacrificial altar. There had to be a substitutionary lamb sacrificed on behalf of the man who would approach God. Without the shedding of blood, there could be no approaching God:

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

For 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, i.e., the whole person needs to be cleansed. Jesus made it clear to Peter that, unless the blood of Christ's sacrifice on Calvary's tree washes him clean, he had no part with Christ. There can be no approach to a Holy God unless the sacrifice of Calvary has been imputed (possessed by someone to 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).

Question 4) 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, i.e., the outer room of the Temple itself, he had to wash his hands and feet at the bronze laver or basin.

They 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).

You 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 the Word of God, i.e., the message of the sufficiency of the sacrifice of Christ and our obedience to it, we are cleansed. However, we still have to live in this world system, which is contrary to God. As we walk through this life, there will be occasions when we sin. There are times when our feet (speaking of our daily walk) will get dirty. We must have our feet washed, which is symbolic of confessing our sin and walking in His forgiveness. Jesus said to His disciples that they already were clean 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 appreciate a deeper meaning in the foot washing He performed for them that night. After Christ left them, I am sure they recalled many times how He served them during their last night together, thus reminding them of how to serve one another. □

Cleansing through Confession of Sin

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. He said, "Decomposed material conveyed to a wound causes childbirth fever. I have shown how it is 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." However, 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 disease can spread when there is no cleansing. Infection can lead to death unless it is 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 the confession of our 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 that we may be forgiven and cleansed. After we receive forgiveness, we 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 is described as keeping in step with the Spirit. If we do this, we will be much more aware of our dirty feet when God is speaking by His Holy Spirit. If we do not, our hearts can become hardened through sin. The Apostle John understood and instructed us in this way:

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 intimate fellowship with God. He has purified us from *ALL* unrighteousness. The Holy Spirit is ready to lead us and keep us walking in the way He wants us to go. Our success does not depend on our abilities. Christian life depends on Christ and His forgiveness. If we have called on the Lord to forgive our sins, He has already made us clean through His sacrifice, and He is ready to guide us and continually cleanse our walk as we learn to keep in step with Him. He will lead us from one degree of glory to the next until we meet Him face to face (2 Corinthians 3:18).

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

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