

How far Does Your & My “Feet-Washing” Go?

Jn 13:1-17 (text)

9 August 2020, Reformed Church of Wainui 16:30

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

It was a Thursday night¹ – the night before Christ was crucified.

Our Lord & His disciples were in the Upper room; the table was set – that very table at which our Lord would within minutes institute the Lord’s Supper!

Well, through an outward act, Christ was going to teach the disciples and us an enormous lesson.

And our text allows for us three points...

- A Humble Outward Act
- An Outward Act with Stunning Symbolism
- How Far Does Your & My Feet-washing Go?

A Humble Outward Act

Christ & His disciples were ready to eat. That means they were lying on low couches around the table – their feet facing away from the table and hanging off the edge of each one’s couch!²

What needed to happen first, according to their custom, was that someone needed to now do the humble task of washing the guests’ feet.

Normally, this was arranged by the host at a meal – as part of his deeds of hospitality.

However, the host *himself* wouldn’t do it, because it was far too lowly a deed for a person of high status to do.³ But it was on *him* to arrange that a servant/slave would take a basin & towel and do the round!⁴ But who would do it this time?

You would expect that one of the disciples would jump up and say, “Hey brothers, I’ll wash your feet!”

But would a disciple really take up this low job?

It seems (that), only minutes before, they were still arguing about who of them was the greatest.⁵

¹ Most probably Thu 6 April 30 AD (cf. Hendriksen, W. 2004. Exposition of the Gospel according to John (In: Hendriksen, W. ed. New testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Book House. p.220). Also cf. “What year did Christ die?”

[<http://www.bibleresearch.org/observancebook5/b5w41.html>]

² cf. Hendriksen (ibid), but also Bailey (1983) for his comment on this cultural aspect in Lk 7

³ “The task of footwashing was so menial that according to some Jewish sources, Jewish slaves were exempt and the job kept for Gentiles. One story reports how Rabbi Ishmael returned home and his wife tried to wash his feet. He refused, claiming it was too demeaning. She took the question to a rabbinic court, arguing that it was in fact an honor. In the splendid romantic Jewish book of *Joseph and Asenath*, Joseph’s bride, Asenath, is so overcome with love for Joseph that she offers to wash his feet. When Joseph protests and sends for a servant girl, Asenath interrupts him. ‘No, my Lord, because you are my lord from now on and I (am) your maidservant. For your feet are my feet and your hands are my hands ... another woman will never wash your feet’ (20:4)” (cf. Burge, G. M. (2000). *John* (NIV Application Commentary. pp. 367–371). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House).

⁴ cf. Hendriksen (ibid:228)

⁵ cf. Hendriksen (ibid:228) & Lk 22:24!

Well, it was at this point that Christ, their Lord & Teacher,⁶ got up and performed the task!

v. 4 tells us: Christ took off His outer clothing and wrapped a towel around His waist. Congregation, imagine what your/my Lord looked like when He moved about in the room with only a loin cloth on and a towel wrapped around His waist – his upper body naked! I'll tell you what He looked like: If someone who didn't know Him peeked into that room, they would think this half-naked man was a servant – indeed, a slave!⁷ And they wouldn't be wrong, for what else did the Son of God choose to be but a servant, yes, a slave!?

You see, He who was in very nature God made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a human being – in fact, a *servant*! (Phil 2:6a & 7a).

So, the King of the Universe dressed himself like a slave, took a water pitcher, poured water into a basin, and started removing dirt from toes!

He went around and washed the feet of His disciples – *all 12 of them* – yes, Christ even showed His patience⁸ by washing the feet of *Judas* – the same two feet who would only minutes later stand in Caiaphas' court betraying the very One who washed them!⁹

Well, v. 13 tells us: when He had washed the feet of all 12, Christ put on His clothes again and returned to His place at the table.

And then we hear Him say:

“Do you understand what I have done for you?” ...¹³ “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am.¹⁴ Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet.¹⁵ I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.

My brother & sister, what exactly did Christ want to teach His disciples and us?

Did He want us to, once a year, (or every so often) have a congregational meeting at which we wash one another's feet!?

Some have thought so. That's why, in some Christian denominations, they have instituted a feet-washing ceremony at which those considered to be in the higher offices of the church wash the feet of the rest!¹⁰

Should all Christians now start to literally wash the feet of the poor & humble? Is that what Christ wanted us to do?

Not really!

What then?

Does this feet-washing mean we should always serve one another in all humility?

Well, that is certainly included, but even *that's* not all our Lord wanted to teach us with this passage!

⁶ ὁ διδάσκαλος, καὶ ὁ κύριος (v.13)

⁷ “When Jesus ‘takes off his outer clothing’ and wraps a towel around himself (13:4), he is adopting the posture of a slave” (Burge, *ibid*).

⁸ “The fact alone that Jesus washed Judas’s feet is stunning and is a testimony to Jesus’ patience and love for his followers (even the man who betrays him). Judas is now a man in the grip of the darkness” (Burge, *ibid*).

⁹ My rendering of Lucado, M. *ibid*. Just like Jesus. Nashville, TE : Thomas Nelson. p.18

¹⁰ cf. Calvin (1978:378). Talking about the Roman Catholic Church, Calvin says, “Ainsi quand ils ont usé de cette cérémonie vaine et folle, ils pensent s’être bien acquittés; et ayant fait cela, ils se baillent congé de ne pas tenir compte de leurs frères tout le reste de l’an.” Instead, what did Christ say to us with this feet-washing? Calvin says, “Ainsi, le Christ ne nous commande point ici une cérémonie qui se fasse tous les ans, mais il veut que nous soyons appareillés (prêts) à toutes heures, et tout le temps de notre vie, à laver les pieds de nos frères et prochains.”

You see, there are quite a few things said & done in this passage which indicate (that) “feet-washing” goes much further (& deeper) than just humble service – which brings us to point 2...

An Outward Act with Stunning Symbolism

My brother & sister,

The whole feet-washing episode should be seen in light of the bigger picture – in light of what was going to happen the next day on Golgotha when Christ’s humble & sacrificial death was going *to wash away the sins of His loved ones!*

Look, is that not why v 1 reminds us: this feet-washing episode happened “... ***just before the Passover Feast!***”?

Is that not why v. 1 also indicates our Lord did this washing because He “***knew the time had come for Him to leave this world...***”?

And, again, is this not why v. 3 tells us, “***Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands...got up from supper***”¹¹ and did the feet washing! In other words, Christ got up from the meal *because* He knew about the cross, tomorrow!

And is that not also why v. 1 says that, although Christ had all along loved the eleven disciples, now (i.e. that night in the Upper room with this feet-washing episode) He was going to show them the *full extent* of His love!?¹²

Congregation, the evidence is overwhelming: the feet-washing episode has to be seen as a symbol of Christ’s humble & sacrificial death of the next day – that death that would work a *spiritual* cleansing for God’s loved ones;¹³ yes, that death that would wash away your & my sins!

And this gets even clearer when Jesus responds to Peter’s impulsive remarks (v.6-10)!

You see, when Peter refused that Christ should wash his feet, what did our Lord answer? He said, “***You do not realise now what I am doing, but later¹⁴ you will understand.***”

In other words, “Peter, later on, after My cross-death, tomorrow, and after My resurrection, three days from now, and after My ascension into Heaven and after Pentecost, *then* the entire work of My humiliation will be clear to you. *Then* you will

¹¹ Thus the NASB which is close to the original which says, “Having known that the Father had given Him everything in the hands ... He got up from the meal...” (εἰδὼς ὅτι πάντα ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ ὁ πατήρ εἰς τὰς χεῖρας * καὶ ὅτι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἐξῆλθεν καὶ πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ὑπάγει, ⁴ ἐγείρεται ἐκ τοῦ δείπνου). The NIV84, although a somewhat freer translation, has made it easier to see the link between Christ’s knowing and His resulting getting up from the meal: “***Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; ⁴ so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist***” (Emphasis mine).

¹² cf. Bouma, C. 1964. Het Evangelie naar Johannes: opnieuw uit de grondtekst vertaald en verklaard. (In: Aalders, G.CH. et al eds. Kampen : J H Kok. p.70), “De tijdsvorm van het werkwoord de tweede keer wijst heel duidelijk aan niet een durende toestand, maar één bepaalde daad, of een reeks van daden, die op dezelfde tijd zijn verricht, op de avond nl. Daarom is de vertaling, reeds door de Statenvert. gegeven: tot het einde, ook niet te aanvaarden als juist; bedoeld is, gelijk het gebezigde Griekse woord dan ook betekent: de voleinding; tot het einde kàn wel worden gelezen, maar dan in de betekenis van: tot de volle, volkomen afsluiting toe, waarmee de volkomen betoning is bereikt.” It is also in the sense here expressed by Bouma that the NIV84 has rendered this sentence as: “***Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love***” (Emphasis mine). I find this the best rendering of the Aorist Indicative Active 3rd Person Singular of ἠγάπησεν. (The whole sentence in the Greek is: Πρὸ δὲ τῆς ἑορτῆς τοῦ πάσχα εἰδὼς ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὅτι ἦλθεν αὐτοῦ ἡ ὥρα ἵνα μεταβῆ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου πρὸς τὸν πατέρα, ἀγαπήσας τοὺς ἰδίους τοὺς ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ εἰς τέλος ἠγάπησεν αὐτούς).

¹³ “The cleansing work of Jesus—footwashing, symbolizing spiritual cleansing on the cross—is complete in itself and therefore Peter does not need to pursue more” (Burge, *ibid*).

¹⁴ μετὰ ταῦτα

understand that what I'm doing now involves a whole lot more than just humble feet-washing!"¹⁵

Well, what this "whole lot more" meant, becomes even clearer when Christ says in v 8 "***Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.***"

It becomes even clearer still when Christ says in v. 10 "***A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.***"

You see, my brother & sister, Christ talks in picture language! And this is the picture: Imagine someone had taken a bath before he went to a meal for which he was invited. Now, with sandals on his feet and through the dusty roads of Palestine, he walks to the house of the host. Well, when he arrives at the house of the host, does his whole body need washing again? No! As per custom, only his dirty feet need washing at the table – not his whole body, for that was already washed at home.

So, what is Christ saying to Peter?

Well, He's saying (that) someone who has been born again by the Holy Spirit of God (someone who is already in Christ) does not need to have the sins, which have already been forgiven, forgiven again! Such a person only needs assurance that his ongoing daily acts of sin, committed after regeneration, are washed away time & time again by his gracious Saviour!¹⁶

See?

With this feet-washing, Christ was giving the following message to Peter & the other ten (not to Judas, for in v 10b-11 our Lord clearly excluded Judas) – here it is:

Tonight & tomorrow, even you who have been born again, will all desert Me!

These feet that I have washed tonight, will all run away from Me!

Well, that's why, in gracious lovingkindness, I'm washing them already now to indicate with this washing-act that I have forgiven you – yes, forgiven you in advance!

And indeed, all eleven of you have had the whole body washed – at the time when My Holy Spirit regenerated your hearts! But now, through this feet-washing act, I graciously tell you that also your sin of betraying & deserting Me – also this sin – I forgive you in advance!

Tomorrow, when everything is over and I lie in the tomb – yes, tomorrow evening when you look at these very feet that have deserted Me, then, remember this feet-washing episode; remember it and have peace that with this washing act I have graciously forgiven you!

Yes, on the strength of my cross-death, I have forgiven you in advance! Tomorrow night your feet will look dirty, but they will still be regarded as clean!

My brother & sister, in light of this, how far does feet-washing go?

Well, that brings us to the last point...

¹⁵ cf. Hendriksen (2004:231)

¹⁶ Bouma (ibid:72) interprets this the same: "... Daarom behoeven de discipelen niet meer de eerste reiniging van de zonden, wàt de Here zou hebben aangeduid als nog nodig, indien Hij Simons begeerte had vervuld. Zij zijn reeds gewassen door het bad der wedergeboorte, Tit. 3:5. De Heilige Geest heeft hen gereinigd in zedelijk-religieuze zin van de bezoedelende smet der zonde, die hen voor God en mensen walgelijk en onrein maakte. Het vuil van de zonde is van hen af. Maar hun dagelijkse zonden bezoedelen hen nog. Ze behoeven nog de reiniging, door de voetwassing gesymboliseerd."

How Far Does Your & My Feet-washing Go?

Well, knowing now that this feet-washing episode was much more than just a humble act of service, but that it was a picture of forgiveness of sins, how should the disciples & we understand our Lord's words of v 14-15?

He said, "**Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.** ¹⁵ **I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.**

See? Yes, our Lord does want us to humbly *serve* one another, but He wants something much deeper!

You see, what is harder to do: to swallow your pride and humbly *serve* someone else, or to swallow your pride and *forgive* someone else the sin he has committed against you?

Is it not so that *forgiving* is the harder one!?

Yet, Col 3:13 says, "**Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.**" And is that not also the message of the parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18:21-35)?

Perhaps someone says, "Oh, I could never do that! The hurt's too deep! Just *seeing that person* brings up all the old bitterness again!"

Well, perhaps that's exactly your & my problem: we fix our eyes on *that* person, but we forget that the secret of being just like Jesus is to fix our eyes on *Him* – not so much on this or that person!¹⁷

My brother & sister,

Apart from time & place, your & my story is the same as that of the disciples. Yes, we're not in the Upper Room in Jerusalem and it's not Thursday night – the night before our Lord's crucifixion! Rather, we're in Wainui and it's the 9th August 2020)! However, what Jesus did for them, He also did for you & me – He cleansed us from sin!

He washed our hearts!

And just as with the disciples' feet-washing, Christ washed our hearts for two reasons:

1st – to show us grace according to His unimaginable love;

2nd – to give us a message: the message to graciously forgive as we have been graciously forgiven.

And, as someone has said,¹⁸ you & I can do one of three things with the person who did us wrong:

We can either *flee* from that person, or *fight* that person, or *forgive* that person. Yes, it's one of three F's (F, F, or F) – flee, fight, or forgive!

Well, in the light of what Christ has done – why not humble ourselves and forgive?

I love how someone has put it: Most of the times *Relationships don't thrive because the guilty are punished but because the innocent are merciful.*¹⁹ (Repeat).

You see, more often than not, when the one in the right is moved to "wash the feet" of the one in the wrong, both parties get on their knees.²⁰

Once, in a previous congregation, I received a phone call. It was a member of the congregation, a sister in Christ. Her elderly sister, from another town, had come to visit her. But that elderly sister carried an awful lot of bitterness against their brother in Australia – bitterness because of something their brother once had said to her. This

¹⁷ cf. Lucado (ibid:19)

¹⁸ cf. Lucado (ibid:21)

¹⁹ cf. Lucado (ibid:21)

²⁰ cf. Lucado (ibid:21)

embittered elderly sister just would not listen to her younger sister's pleas to forgive their brother. So, the younger sister rang me to please come as fast as I could.

So, I went to her house! Having then listened to the embittered older sister, I explained to her the message of our text (Jn 13:1-20), and knelt & prayed with both sisters!

Great was my joy when, months later, I heard that the Lord had softened the embittered sister's heart – so much so that she wrote a letter to their brother in Australia and asked for his forgiveness. Now, I never knew who exactly was the guilty party, but that elderly sister must have remembered the words of the saying I quoted for her: *Relationships don't thrive because the guilty are punished but because the innocent are merciful.*²¹

Well, as someone has said so well, that letter she wrote – that letter *might as well have been a basin. And the pen in that older sister's hand might as well have been a pitcher of water, for out of it poured pure mercy, and with it she "washed her brother's feet."*²²

My brother & sister, certain conflicts can only be resolved with a "basin of water!"

Is there perhaps someone in your & my life whose feet our Lord is asking us to wash?

In v. 17 Christ says, "...*you will be blessed if you do it!*"

Now, *being blessed* does not mean you will be wealthy, or that other people will consider you to be happy, but rather: you will have the blessed peace that passes understanding – the peace of being the object of God's favour!

Look, is that not also the message of Ps 32, which says...?

***Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.***

***²Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in
whose spirit is no deceit.***²³

My brother & sister, the Lord of the Universe has "washed your & my feet" – and more than that: He has graciously forgiven all our sins & made us right with Him.

Why will we now not be like Him? Why will we now not fix our eyes on Him and forgive as we have been forgiven?

AMEN (2464 – word count, excluding footnotes)

²¹ cf. Lucado (ibid:21)

²² Lucado (ibid)

²³ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Ps 32:1–2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.