

Tonight we will listen to the 13th chapter of John's Gospel where Jesus washes the feet of the disciples and encounters Peter's objection. We will then discuss the meaning and review a couple of commentaries on this subject.

John 13 New International Version (NIV)

Jesus Washes His Disciples' Feet

13 It 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. 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!"

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.

Jesus Predicts His Betrayal

¹⁸"I am not referring to all of you; I know those I have chosen. But this is to fulfill this passage of Scripture: 'He who shared my bread has turned^[a] against me.'^[b]

¹⁹"I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am who I am. ²⁰Very truly I tell you, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me."

²¹After he had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, "Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me."

²²His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. ²³One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. ²⁴Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, "Ask him which one he means."

²⁵Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?"

²⁶Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. ²⁷As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him.

So Jesus told him, "What you are about to do, do quickly." ²⁸But no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. ²⁹Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the festival, or to give something to the poor. ³⁰As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night.

Jesus Predicts Peter's Denial

³¹When he was gone, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. ³²If God is glorified in him,^[c] God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.

³³“My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.

³⁴“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

³⁶Simon Peter asked him, “Lord, where are you going?”

Jesus replied, “Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later.”

³⁷Peter asked, “Lord, why can’t I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.”

³⁸Then Jesus answered, “Will you really lay down your life for me? Very truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!

THE MEANING OF FOOTWASHING IN JOHN 13:1-17

THE MEANING OF FOOTWASHING IN JOHN 13:1-17

by Jack Cottrell (Notes) on Thursday, October 13, 2011 at 4:27pm

QUESTION: When Jesus washes the apostles' feet in John 13:1ff., is this just a lesson in humility, or does it have some spiritual significance beyond that? E.g., does the footwashing as Jesus performs it stand for personal cleansing from sin? Is it a figure for baptism? Does the act itself represent Jesus' service of dying on the cross for the sins of the world?

ANSWER: My initial reaction to this question is that this episode is just a lesson in humility, and that reading anything else into it requires a lot of speculation. But as the football officials sometimes say when one of their calls is challenged, "Upon further review . . ." Thus what follows is a closer look at John's record of this event.

The event in question occurs just before the Last Supper, which John chooses not to record since the other gospels have already given three accounts of it. Instead he records an event that had specific reference to Jesus' band of apostles, who were prone to argue "which of them might be the greatest" (Luke 9:46-48; 22:24-27). Thus in dramatic fashion, because He loved them (John 13:1), He taught them this lesson on humility.

The details of footwashing as an act of hospitality and kindness are well known. It was not a religious ceremony, but simply a tradition of good manners on the part of a host or hostess welcoming guests into his or her home (compare Luke 7:36-50; 1 Tim. 5:10). The roadways were either dusty or muddy, and the footwear was sandals; so guests usually arrived with dingy feet. Thus inside the doorway of most homes sat a container of water, along with a basin and a towel or apron with which to wash and dry the feet.

The important point here is that such footwashing was something done FOR a guest, and was an extremely MENIAL task, done by servants or slaves if these were available. As Gary Burge says, it "was a degrading and lowly task" with specific social implications. "In no way do we find those with a 'higher' status washing the feet of those beneath them" (Zondervan's NIV Application Commentary on John, 369).

When Jesus and His apostles arrived at the upper room, the landlord from whom it was rented had apparently provided the necessities for footwashing (water, basin, towel/apron). However, there was no host as such. Thus they all went directly to the dining furniture and prepared to eat. There may have been an awkward moment when the apostles looked at one another and wondered which of themselves (if any) would take on the servant's role. None did. This is when Jesus "got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself" and "began to wash the disciples' feet" (vv. 4,5).

There can be no question that He was doing this to set an example of humility and humble service for His too-proud disciples. Indeed, when He had completed the task, this was the only lesson He directly drew from the incident and specifically taught to them as a group (vv. 12-17).

However, most interpreters see much more in this episode as a whole. Barclay says we must always look for two meanings in John: the one that lies on the surface, and the one beneath the surface. "In this passage there is undoubtedly a second meaning" (The Gospel of John II, Westminster, 163-164). The second meaning is on the spiritual level, and is found almost altogether in connection with Peter's resistance to Jesus' attempt to wash his feet and the conversation that ensued between these two (vv. 6-11).

Down through Christian history and among commentators today, it has been common to interpret Jesus' statements to Peter as referring to the cleansing from sin that has been made possible through the cross. When Jesus says, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me" (v. 8), He is saying that one must submit to Him for the washing away of sin in order to be saved, or to be a Christian. One must not only let his feet be washed, but must be totally bathed and "completely clean" (v. 10). As Leon Morris says, "In the context it must refer to the washing of the feet. Unless Peter submits to the foot-washing he may not eat with Jesus. But Jesus means more. A literal washing of the feet is not necessary before a man can be a Christian. The words point us to a washing free from sin which only Christ can give. Apart from this a man will have no part in Christ" (The Gospel According to John, Eerdmans, 617).

Because the footwashing obviously involves water, it has also been common to see this event as teaching the necessity of baptism for salvation. Barclay says, "Beyond a doubt there is a reference to Christian baptism here. 'Unless you are washed,' said Jesus, 'you can have no part in me.' That is a way of saying: 'Unless you pass through the gate of baptism, you have no part in the Church'" (164). He

qualifies this, however: “This is not to say that a man cannot be saved unless he is baptized.” Baptism is definitely pictured, though, as “the entry to the Church” (164-165). This has led to a debate about which baptism Jesus means, since only John’s baptism was known at that time. Others, by distinguishing between the complete bath one would take before leaving home and the footwashing one would receive upon arriving at the host’s house (v. 10), see a double reference here: the former to baptism as the initial total cleansing, and the latter to the Lord’s Supper as the on-going cleansing from spiritual “dirt” accumulated after baptism.

I believe that all of this is reading much too much into this event, and into the remarks Jesus makes to Peter in verses 6-11. I cannot see any reference to baptism here, or to “sacramental” theology in general. I do not see anything here that refers specifically to the Christian era, the post-Pentecostal age of the Church. I do agree that Jesus is making a spiritual application of the concept of washing, which is evident in v. 10 when He says to Peter, “You [plural] are clean, but not all of you.” In v. 11 John makes it clear that he is excluding Judas from this statement; this shows He is making reference to spiritual cleanness.