DO YOU WASH DIRTY FEET?

John 13:12-20

By

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John, Lesson 72

**Do You Wash Dirty Feet?**  
*John 13:12-20*

Robert Service begins his well-known poem, “The Cremation of Sam McGee”: “There are strange things done in the midnight sun, by the men who moil for gold....” If I may take off on that line, there are strange things done under the sun by the men who claim to be Christians. And one of the strangest was the story of Simeon the Stylite.

Simeon was born about 390 A.D. He lived in different monasteries in northern Syria. Then around 423 he started to live on top of a platform on top of a pillar. Gradually he increased the height of the pillar until it was about 60 feet off the ground. Simeon lived up there by himself as an ascetic for 36 years! Don’t ask how he took care of basic bodily functions! I’m reasonably certain that the pillar was not equipped with modern plumbing! But he thought that he was being holy by being separate from the world. People flocked from miles around to listen to him preach from the top of his pillar. His example led to a movement that lasted for centuries, where others dwelled on top of their own pillars.

Strange! But, maybe Simeon was onto something! Think how much less conflict there would be in the local church if we all built our own pillars out of shouting distance from each other (with no phone or email)! But, seriously, how did such a bizarre idea ever take hold in the Christian world?

Yet, while we aren’t living on top of our own respective pillars, sometimes Christians, at least here in America, are an independent, isolated bunch. We view the Christian life as each of us having our own relationship with God, which is essential. But then often we isolate ourselves from other believers. We go to church on Sundays like we go to the movies. We walk in, nod to others we don’t really know, sit through the program, and go home. Except on a superficial level, we have little personal contact with other believers throughout the week. It’s not unusual for me to counsel someone about a personal problem. After listening, I’ll ask, “Do
you know any other believers closely enough with whom you can share these things and pray?” Often the answer is, “No.”

But if we’re not close to one another, we can’t obey Jesus’ command (John 13:14-15), “If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.” To wash someone’s feet requires pretty close personal contact!

Now right away my thought is, “Foot washing is something I can do quite well by myself, thank you.” In fact, I’d rather do it myself! It’s kind of personal, especially if my feet are really dirty! So, please, just let me do it myself. And, I’d really prefer not to wash your dirty feet either. I’ll give you the basin, the water and the towel and let you do it. But I’d rather not wash your dirty feet, either.

But that’s not what Jesus said. He didn’t say, “Provide the basin, the water, and the towel so that everyone can wash their own feet.” He said, “You wash one another’s feet.” But that’s asking us to get a bit too close for comfort, isn’t it? Yet, down in verse 35, Jesus says, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples”—not by you all living sanctified lives by yourselves on top of your own pillars. “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” And so this act of washing one another’s feet is certainly a picture of the love that we should have for one another in the body of Christ. The main idea is:

Jesus commands us all to wash one another’s feet.

But that raises some questions: What do you mean, “wash one another’s feet”? How do we do it? And, why should we do it?

**What does it mean to wash one another’s feet?**

As you know, some churches take Jesus’ words literally by conducting a foot-washing service. You can always be sure that when they have such a service, nobody actually needs to have their feet washed! Everyone washes their own feet at home just before the service and puts on clean socks! So those who take it literally aren’t washing dirty feet! They’re washing clean feet!

There’s nothing wrong with having such a ceremony, but I don’t believe that is what Jesus was talking about. In verse 12, He asked the disciples, “Do you know what I have done to you?” Ob-
viously, they all knew that He had just washed their feet. But He was pointing to a symbolic meaning behind what He had just done. If this is supposed to be a church ordinance, added to baptism and the Lord’s Supper, you would think that somewhere in the New Testament it would be enjoined on the church. Paul commends widows who have washed the saints’ feet (1 Tim. 5:10), but he wasn’t referring to a church ordinance, but to the widows’ humble service toward other believers. Peter is silent on this in his letters, but he does instruct us to clothe ourselves with humility toward one another (1 Pet. 5:5). I believe that that is the overall idea here, which we can view in four parts:

1. **Washing one another’s feet is a ministry of forgiveness, cleansing, refreshment, and humble service.**

   A. Washing one another’s feet is a ministry of forgiveness.

   As we saw in our last study, Jesus’ washing the disciples’ feet pictured the relational forgiveness between each of them and Himself. It is paralleled by 1 John 1:7, “… the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.” This refers to a repeated application of God’s once-and-for-all forgiveness to our ongoing sins. We confess our sins to God and ask His forgiveness, not to secure our position with Him as His children, but to restore our relationship with Him as our Father.

   Ephesians 4:32 commands, “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” We are to extend the forgiveness that we have received from God through Christ to those who have wronged us. In that way we symbolically “wash their feet.” It makes me sad when I see believers who do not forgive other believers who have wronged them. Granted, the other person needs to ask for forgiveness before you extend it verbally. But we are required to root out all bitterness and forgive the offender in our hearts so that we are ready to extend forgiveness verbally the instant the offender repents. When you forgive, you wash the offender’s dirty feet.

   B. Washing one another’s feet is a ministry of cleansing.

   In Ephesians 5:26, Paul talks about Christ cleansing the church “by the washing of water with the word.” When we share the Word with one another, we wash off the sin and crud of this
world. Sometimes a brother has fallen into some sin. When that happens, Paul instructs (Gal. 6:1), “Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.” One of the most effective ways to restore a sinning brother is to use God’s Word.

At other times, maybe a brother has dirty feet not because of sin, but just because he’s been walking in this dirty world. To share a verse that God has used in your life or a verse that you’ve memorized and applied to some problem can be a source of cleansing.

But as someone has pointed out, when you wash someone’s feet with the water of the Word, make sure that the temperature is right! Some sanctimonious believers love to wash their brothers’ feet with scalding water! “Here, brother, stick your feet in this basin!” “Yeoww!” That’s why Paul says that we are to restore in a spirit of gentleness. Don’t blast someone with the Word. Restore him so that he will feel cleansed, not scalded! That leads to...

C. Washing one another’s feet is a ministry of refreshment.

When you came in off the dusty roads with dirty feet, it was refreshing to get them washed. In 1 Corinthians, Paul mentions three men who had come to him from the Corinthian church. He adds (1 Cor. 16:18), “For they have refreshed my spirit and yours.” He tells Philemon (1:7), “… the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.” Have you ever known someone like that? A person who is always fresh with the Lord, so that when you get around him, you feel refreshed.

I used to have an older pastor friend like that. He had met Christ at age 41, when he was a drug-using, alcoholic night club singer. Every time I got together with him he was rejoicing in some new experience of God’s grace or some new insight in God’s Word. I always came away refreshed. In that way, he washed my feet. Do you do that with others? Do they feel refreshed in the Lord after being with you? What about at home? That’s the test!

So, washing one another’s feet is a ministry of forgiveness, cleansing, and refreshment. Also...

D. Washing one another’s feet is a ministry of humble service in ways that may be unpleasant to you.
Having a foot-washing ceremony where you wash already clean feet is relatively easy. But Jesus’ command here to wash one another’s dirty, smelly feet is not so easy. He meant that we should do unpleasant tasks that serve others in their area of need. As I said last week, this means that no task should be beneath us as we serve others for Christ’s sake.

Years ago, a man went to hear Dr. Alan Redpath speak. Dr. Redpath was the pastor of the large Moody Church in Chicago and was a widely known Christian speaker and author. But the man didn’t know what Dr. Redpath looked like. He got there early and he saw two men setting up chairs before the meeting. One was the janitor, but the man didn’t realize until Dr. Redpath got up to speak that the other man was Dr. Redpath. He was there early helping the janitor set up chairs. He wasn’t advertising it. If this guy had not gotten there before the meeting, he wouldn’t have known what Dr. Redpath had done. But, that kind of humble service is what Jesus was talking about.

One practical way that we all can serve here on Sundays is to pick up litter that you see around the building. Maybe you’re thinking, “Doesn’t our custodian do that?” Yes, he works hard at it. But it shouldn’t be his job only. He’s got a lot to do. What if a visitor walks in before the custodian has had a chance to pick up the litter and the visitor thinks, “This place is a dump. I’m going to find a church that is clean!” You can serve the Lord and that visitor by picking up the trash that you see. Another way you can humbly serve others is, if you’re healthy, don’t grab the closest parking spot unless you have a lot of stuff to carry inside. Leave the closest spots for visitors and get some exercise!

Well, I’m already answering the second question, but let me address a couple of other aspects of it:

**HOW DO WE WASH ONE ANOTHER’S FEET?**

2. **We wash one another’s feet by being humble servants of Christ and by being in close relationships with others.**

Being humble servants of Christ deals with our focus and motivation; being in close relationships looks at the practical requirement for obeying Christ’s command.
A. We wash one another’s feet by being humble servants of Christ.

In verse 16, Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him.” Clearly, Jesus is the master (“Lord,” John 13:13, 14) and we are His slaves. He gives the commands and we are to obey without questioning or grumbling. No task was beneath a slave’s dignity to do. As Jesus taught (Luke 17:7-10):

“Which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come immediately and sit down to eat’? But will he not say to him, ‘Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me while I eat and drink; and afterward you may eat and drink’? He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.’”

So here He states (John 13:17), “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.” “These things” refers back to the example and commandment that He has just given, that we are to wash one another’s feet. We are humbly to serve one another in ways that may be unpleasant to us. But obedience requires more than just doing it while you grumble under your breath. Obedience requires doing it cheerfully and thankfully, out of love for Christ, who gave Himself on the cross for you. It’s all about your mindset and your motivation.

One other thing that Jesus’ example shows us is that we need to wash one another’s feet without looking for or expecting a favorable response from others. In other words, we don’t serve others hoping that they will reciprocate or express their deep gratitude. Often they don’t. Jesus washed Judas’ feet, but he went out and betrayed Jesus. He washed Peter’s feet, but he denied Him that night. He washed Thomas’ feet, but he doubted Jesus’ resurrection. He washed all the disciples’ feet, but they all deserted Him and ran when He got arrested.
If you humbly serve Christ in any capacity, I can guarantee that you will not receive the appreciation you deserve from those you serve. You'll probably get some appreciation, but you'll also catch some undeserved criticism. And it won't come from those outside the church. It will come from believers. So you have to keep your focus on your Master. You are His slave because He bought you with His blood. You serve others for His sake.

B. We wash one another’s feet by being in close relationships with one another.

As I mentioned earlier, foot washing can’t be done if we’re all sitting on top of our individual pillars, with no contact with one another. It can’t be done by sending a robot across the room to wash others’ feet. It requires a rather uncomfortable closeness to wash someone’s feet and to allow them to wash your feet. It requires being vulnerable and honest. You have to let the other person see just how dirty your feet really are.

It’s easy to come to church, smile at everyone and say hello, and go home without ever divulging to anyone that your feet are dirty. I’m not suggesting that you share your innermost struggles with everyone you meet. There needs to be an appropriate relationship of trust before you share where you’re hurting. But the point is, we need to be developing some close, trusting relationships so that we can serve one another by washing each other’s feet. Get involved in a home fellowship or small group. Ask God for a godly brother or sister in Christ that you can get to know well. You can’t wash others’ feet or have your feet washed from a distance.

But then, once you’ve grown close to someone, you’ve still got to do it. You’re blessed not just by knowing that you should wash one another’s feet, but by doing it (John 13:17). It’s not enough to find out that the other person is hurting, and then to say, “I’ll pray for you,” and walk away. You’ve got to get your hands dirty by trying to help. Do it gently, not with boiling water, as I said. But, do it! You can ask, “May I share from God’s Word some ways that I’ve been helped?” Pray with the person. Don’t judge or condemn. Remember, you’ve got dirty feet, too! But the point is to grow close enough in relationships so that we can offer genuine encouragement, help, and refreshment through God’s Word.
So washing one another’s feet is a ministry of forgiveness, cleansing, refreshment, and humble service. We do it by being humble servants of Christ and by being in close relationships with one another.

**WHY SHOULD WE WASH ONE ANOTHER’S FEET?**

3. We should wash one another’s feet because the Lord and Teacher has washed our feet.

Jesus said (John 13:14), “If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” In other words, because Jesus has cleansed your sins by His death on the cross, because He is the Lord of all, and because He is the Teacher from whom you learn how to live, you serve others in love because He commanded you to do so. Or, more succinctly, your salvation is the reason why you serve Jesus Christ. He bought you with His blood. Now you’re His slave.

But Jesus makes an exception for His commandment (John 13:18): “I do not speak of all of you. I know the ones I have chosen; but it is that the Scripture may be fulfilled, ‘He who eats My bread has lifted up his heel against Me.’” The Scripture is from Psalm 41:9 and refers here to Judas. Although Jesus had chosen Judas as an apostle, Judas had never submitted to Jesus as Lord. He had heard His teaching and seen His miracles. He had preached to others about Jesus. He even had his feet washed outwardly. But Judas wasn’t clean all over (John 13:10). Jesus hadn’t cleansed Judas inwardly. So Jesus warns the other disciples of Judas’ defection in advance so that it wouldn’t shake their faith (John 13:19-20):

“From now on I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am He Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.”

The connection between verses 19 & 20 is difficult to understand, but verse 20 seems to be a word of encouragement to the disciples in view of the prophecy about Judas’ defection. Jesus is saying, “Don’t despair when Judas betrays Me and I am crucified. Remember that I told you this in advance. Keep believing that I am He (John 14:19). You will be My ambassadors and whoever re-
ceives you receives Me; and “he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me” (John 13:20).

But Judas' example is a warning: You can be closely associated with Jesus and His followers and you can even serve in ministry, and yet you've never had Jesus cleanse your sins. You've never come to Him with your dirty heart and said, “Lord, I need You to wash me! I trust in You as God in human flesh who died on the cross for my sins.” He is not your Savior, your Lord, and your Teacher. Until you've experienced the salvation Jesus alone can give, you can serve Him by doing good deeds all your life, but it won't get you into heaven. The only basis for serving Christ is to know that He, your Lord and Teacher, has truly washed your feet.

Conclusion

I heard about a successful doctor in Southern California who met Jesus Christ and left his lucrative practice to serve in a primitive country. His non-Christian partner couldn't believe that he would do this. On one of his trips around the world, he stopped by to see his former partner. The Christian doctor was performing surgery on a poor woman in very primitive circumstances. The non-Christian said, “Don't you remember how much you would have made doing this surgery in Southern California?”

“Yes, many thousands.” “Then why are you doing it?”

“Several reasons: See her clenched fist? In it are several coins that she will give to our mission. See those kids in the other room? They will be forever grateful if I can save their mother's life. But there's one more thing: I hope to receive from my Lord someday the words, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'”

That's why you should wash others' dirty feet. You do it because the Lord and Teacher washed your feet. You do it for Him.
Application Questions

1. List some practical ways that you can get involved in “foot-washing” (humble service). Put it into your schedule and do it.

2. To what extent should we share our struggles with one another? What criteria apply?

3. Is it more difficult to wash someone else’s dirty feet or to let them wash your dirty feet? Why? How can the difficulties be overcome?

4. How can you determine whether it’s your job or someone else’s job to try to help restore a sinning Christian?

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