

Are You Ready to Wash Some Feet?

Scripture Text: John 13:1–20

Introduction

Last week, we read about how we ought to love one another just as Jesus has loved us. Jesus taught us that by the love we have for one another, the rest of the world will know that we are His disciples. But, what does it mean to love one another? What does this look like? It may be easy for you to say, “I love you,” but are you *showing* love for one another? We learned that true love must be demonstrated by action. Love is not just something we say to one another. Love is more than words, but it is something you do. It is an action. If our love for each other is not demonstrated by action, then we have failed to follow Jesus’ “new commandment”, that we love one another just as He loved us (John 13:34). That kind of love involves a sacrificial love for one another that motivates us to serve one another. Interestingly, when Jesus said these things to His disciples, He had just given them an example of this kind of love. In a way, this passage is a precursor, moreover an example, of Jesus’ new commandment that we are to love one another *just as* He loved us.

Love Goes to the Very End

The second half of John’s account of the Gospel contains what many call Jesus’ Farewell Discourse (chs. 13–17). At this point in John’s account, Jesus has been rejected by the Jews and now turns His attention to His disciples and the new church community. Jesus focused on what it means for people to follow Him as His disciples. He knew that His time on earth was short and that He was about to be betrayed, arrested, and then killed. Thus, He wanted to give His disciples some final instructions and an example of what it means to be His disciple and to be a part of His Church. He began this section by focusing on His love for them. Look at the following.

John 13:1 Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

Jesus was meeting with His disciples for what we now call the Lord’s Supper. This was not the Passover meal, but it was a meal just before it. During this meal, Jesus spoke about His love for His disciples and He demonstrated it in a very remarkable way. Some view this verse as saying that Jesus loved His own disciples *to the uttermost*. Others see this verse as saying that Jesus loved them *to the very end*, that is, to the end of His life. Actually, both could be correct since the context of the verse is that Jesus knew His time was short and the cross was imminent. In His final hours with His disciples, He showed them a very humble act of service, which we see in this passage, and a very self-sacrificing act of love later, through the cross of Calvary. Jesus’ love is illustrated in this passage in a most unusual and shocking way. The Lord humbled Himself before His disciples in order to show His love for them by performing one of the most menial tasks of a servant. Jesus’ love was extreme and He displayed His love to the very end.

Love Includes Humble Service

What would you do if you only had a few hours left to live? What sort of things would be on your so-called bucket list? With His death imminent, Jesus used this time to give His disciples one more convincing proof of His love for them. He did something that many people would not want to do. What job is too dirty for you to do? For Jesus, love is displayed through humble service, even in the dirtiest of jobs. Look at the following.

John 13:2-5 ² *During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, ⁴ rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. ⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.*

I have a thing for feet, specifically animal feet. I will sometimes comment about our pets' paws. I do not want to wash their feet, though. I do not want to wash people feet either. Jesus washing His disciples' feet is very remarkable. Imagine the Queen of England washing people's feet. Imagine having dinner with the Governor and him going to each guest and washing their feet. You might be surprised by such things. During Jesus' time, people walked long distances on dusty roads in sandals, and their feet became very dirty. It was customary in Jewish culture of the time for the host to arrange for water to be available for washing feet. The task of washing feet was not for a typical house servant, though. Normally, this was done upon arrival by the lowliest member of the household, such as a slave. Washing feet was certainly not done by the host of the meal. Here, Jesus humbled Himself and did the task of a lowly servant.

We should not overlook the crowd that was present that night. Jesus even washed the feet of His enemy. He washed the feet of Judas who would betray Him. Jesus knew what Judas was going to do, and He humbled Himself to serve Judas anyway. This is a contrast between Jesus' self-giving love and Judas' self-serving betrayal. In a striking demonstration of love for His enemies, Jesus washed all of His disciples' feet, including His betrayer. Imagine humbling yourself to serve someone who you knew was going to betray you. That is exactly what Jesus did for *all of us*. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, "While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Romans 5:10). We were all enemies of God, but He loved us so much that He demonstrated His great love for us by sending His only begotten Son for us. Jesus loved us so much to willingly sacrifice Himself so that we all may be saved. Can you humble yourself to serve your enemy? Is there anyone you could not love in this way?

Love Goes Beyond the Physical Needs

So, Jesus showed His love for His disciples by washing their feet like a lowly servant. Jesus emptied Himself of His power and glory, and served His disciples. Jesus served those who should have been serving Him. That is an example that each of us needs to follow. The King of kings and the Lord of lords got down on His knees and washed feet.

If that was not beneath Him, what should we be willing to do for one another? There is another truth that John conveys to us in Jesus act of humble love. There is more to this than simply washing the dirty feet of other people. Look at the next few verses.

John 13:6-11 *⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, do you wash my feet?” ⁷ Jesus answered him, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.” ⁸ Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” ⁹ Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, “The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you.” ¹¹ For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, “Not all of you are clean.”*

Peter, and most likely all of the disciples there, could not understand the humility of Jesus. This is the same Peter who had earlier rebuked Jesus when Jesus told the disciples that He was going to Jerusalem to suffer many things and be killed. Jesus rebuked Peter then and told Him that He was being a hinderance to the work of God (Matthew 16:21-23). Peter was at it again, showing that he did not fully understand Jesus. The disciples walked with Jesus for many years. They heard His messages. They saw His miracles. They believed, to some extent, Jesus was the Messiah who was prophesied to come. Peter had even confessed that Jesus was the Son of the living God. What Jesus' disciples could not believe was that He was a humble servant willing to wash their feet. They were about to be fully shocked by this same Jesus willingly going to the cross. The disciples would understand Jesus more fully after His death.

When Peter refused to have Jesus wash his feet, Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” This was obviously a very direct and stern response and Peter understood the meaning. Jesus was saying either I do this or you cannot be with me. To have no share with Jesus means that one does not belong to Him. Why would Jesus answer Peter so harshly? What was so important about Jesus washing His disciples' feet that if He did not they could not belong to Him? On the surface, this could mean that either we let Jesus do what He came to do and we do what He tells us to do, or we cannot be a part of Him. This could be a simple act of obedience to our Lord. But there is more to Jesus' response to Peter. The foot washing symbolizes the washing we all need for the forgiveness of sin. The foot washing is in anticipation of Jesus' death for His people, by which their sins are truly washed away and they are made clean.

Peter's response to Jesus is almost comical. When Peter heard that either Jesus would wash his feet or he would have no part with Jesus, he basically said to Jesus, “Wash the rest of me.” Do not stop with my feet. Maybe Peter wanted to make sure that he was clean enough to be with the Lord. Peter missed the point. Jesus demonstrated how to follow the new commandment, to love one another. However, those who have been “bathed” by Jesus, through His once-for-all death, are completely clean. They do not need any other cleansing. The disciples may have become wholly clean, but the *whole* group of them was not wholly clean. Because Judas was not spiritually clean, unlike

Peter, he did not have a “share” with Jesus. The disciples’ feet were washed, their souls were bathed, and the community was cleansed with the expulsion of the betrayer.

Loving Service is for All Disciples

What does the foot washing have to do with being a disciple of Christ? How does this help us be a disciple? Jesus had just done for them an incredibly humble task. The disciples may have felt guilty that none of them had thought to do it. Maybe they should have, for Jesus then took what He just had done and called them to action. If Jesus washed their feet as an act of humble service, His disciples could not then treat humility as merely a nice idea. Humility is essential to the Christian life. Jesus expects all of His disciples to follow His example and serve one another. Look at the following verses.

John 13:12-17 ¹² When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, “Do you understand what I have done to you? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

Jesus asked His disciples, “Do you understand what I have done to you?” Perhaps they understood some of it, but probably not all of it. Jesus’ point to them was that if He, their Lord and Teacher, washed their feet, they ought to wash one another’s feet. Jesus’ humble act of washing His disciple’s feet showed that they were not above washing feet. Jesus’ humble act of washing His disciples’ feet showed that being the leader is not a position of arrogance. Leadership is a credential for service. This was not just an example of a leader washing feet, though, but it was also an example of how we should care for one another, regardless of our position or role. We are all called to humble service. We should also not think of this humble act of Jesus washing His disciples’ feet as a ritual. This was a common act of service in His time. Jesus gave us an example for similar acts of humility that all of His disciples ought to do for others.

Therefore, as Jesus did for them, they also should do for each other. That applies to all disciples. If you are a disciple of Christ, if you follow Jesus as your Lord and Savior, then you are called to serve others. None of us are above the menial tasks of service. Rather than being arrogant or entitled, we all ought to be eager to serve others. The foot washing was a humble service to other people without regard to shame and status of society. In fact, the follower of Jesus should realize that the self-giving washing of feet may be far more costly a calling than merely a matter involving water and a towel. To follow Jesus may cost one’s life. As Jesus loved, we ought to love others. We ought to love them to the end, if it means with our lives. As Jesus loved His enemies, we ought to love our enemies. Who is not worthy of your love? Who is not worthy of God’s love? Is that you? As Jesus served, we ought to serve others, with humility. As Jesus washed our souls, we should share the gospel with others for them to be washed, too.

Conclusion

In closing, being a disciple of Jesus Christ is proven by our love for one another. Our love for one another is demonstrated by how we serve one another. Like Christ, we must humble ourselves and serve one another in love. We must consider each other more importantly than ourselves. Yet, many Christians have this sense of “Consumer Christianity”. They believe the Church is here to serve their needs. They look for what the Church has to offer them. Jesus came to serve, not to be served. He expects the same from His disciples. Therefore, do not ask what the Church can do for you; ask what you can do for each other. In what ways can you demonstrate genuine love and commitment to one another? In what ways can you show love, humility, and service to others? Are you ready to wash some feet? May it be so. Thanks be to God. Amen!