

**"ARE YOU GOING TO WASH MY FEET?"****JOHN 13:1-17**

Homeless people gather under the Burnside Bridge in Portland, Oregon. Carloads of Christians from Because People Matter Ministries show up on Thursday nights and minister to needy men and women. In addition to providing hot meals, shaves, and haircuts, some of the volunteers wash the homeless people's feet. This group of society's outcasts have their bare feet immersed in warm water, scrubbed, dried, powdered, and placed in clean socks. One man reported with a smile, "I can't find the words to describe how good that felt." Washing someone's feet is an act most easily performed while kneeling. Given the foot washer's position, and the unpleasant appearance and odor of a homeless person's feet, it's hard to imagine an act more humbling. Would you do something like that for a homeless person – wash his or her feet? That ministry was inspired by the Bible story we're going to consider today.

Questions Jesus answered during Holy Week. That's been the unifying theme of our current message series on these Sundays leading up to today – Palm Sunday. The way Jesus answered these different questions asked by groups or individuals gives us insight into who He is and what He did. Now the question we consider today was asked by Peter, one of Jesus' disciples, on the night before the crucifixion at what history calls the Last Supper – a final meal Jesus shared with these twelve men who had been His primary followers for some three years. Let's read what happened first and then we can reflect on it together.

Peter was the one who asked Jesus the question we consider today, "Are you going to wash my feet?" Knowing more about the culture back then will help us understand this Scripture. Back in Jesus' day, when you were invited to someone's home for a meal, it was customary to take a bath before you went. You would likely then walk from your home to your host's home. No Uber back then! Right there was a problem. The roads in Jesus' day were unsurfaced and dirty. In dry weather, they were covered in inches of dust and dirt. In wet weather, they became liquid mud. The only kind of footwear available back then were sandals. So, by the time you arrived at your host's home, your feet and lower legs were filthy again despite your recent bath. Giving guests the opportunity to wash their feet upon arrival was a normal part of hospitality – much like we offer to hang up peoples' coats when they arrive at our homes today. If your host was wealthy, big water pots might be placed outside the home and a servant poured water over your feet while you rinsed the dirt off and handed you a towel so you could dry off. If your host was of more modest means, you did the task yourself.

Regardless, because it was considered a very lowly, unpleasant task, you washed your own feet. In fact, there's evidence that in Jewish culture of that day and time a master could not require his slave to wash the master's feet. It was considered below even a slave's dignity to do so! So, now we understand Peter's reaction as well as his question better. What Jesus did here was socially and culturally unacceptable. Hosts did not wash the feet of their guests. Rabbis – or teachers – like Jesus did not wash the feet of their followers – their disciples. It was undignified, inappropriate, and just wrong. So,

why did Jesus do it? Everything Jesus said and did had a purpose. What was His purpose here? I suggest Jesus provided insights into two facets of humility.

### **THE HUMILITY THAT SAVES YOU.**

I suppose it's appropriate that "old stick his foot in his mouth" Peter would be front and center in this story about having his feet washed! He was humble enough to feel the awkwardness of having Jesus wash his feet, but he wasn't humble enough not to tell Jesus what not to do! Sounds like Peter, doesn't it? The dialogue here between Jesus and Peter reminds me of the conversation Jesus had with a Samaritan woman. Jesus asked her for a drink and they got into a dialogue about water. The woman referred to literal, actual water, while Jesus went back and forth between literal water and spiritual or living water – which was about getting from God what we need to live a truly abundant life. Jesus was content to let the woman misunderstand His double use of water at least for a while. Likewise, Peter was stuck on how inappropriate it would be for Jesus to wash his feet literally, while Jesus went back and forth between literal footwashing and getting washed in a spiritual sense.

Jesus revealed the deepest, spiritual meaning of washing the disciples' feet when He said to Peter, "Unless I wash you, you won't belong to me." (Jo. 13:8 NLT) Jesus said that unless he washed Peter, Peter couldn't really share life with Him or know Him in a personal way that resulted in salvation. Did Jesus overreact? Sounds pretty extreme, doesn't it? But Jesus was no longer talking about washing literal feet. The next day Jesus was going to hand over His life and die on a cross. His death was going to pay the penalty of the disciples' sins as well as all the sins of all those who would become His followers. Jesus saw what He was about to do in the next 24 hours for what it was - the greatest act of humility and service the universe has ever witnessed. Yes, it was disgraceful and humiliating to wash the disciples' feet. But Jesus was going to allow Himself, God in human flesh, to be disgraced and humiliated in a far more profound way by His death on the cross. That act provided the only way for sinful human beings to be reconciled to His Father and get the opportunity to have their sins forgiveness and receive the gift of eternal life.

So, the footwashing episode was a powerful illustration or symbol of what Jesus was going to accomplish over the next 24 hours by His death on the cross. Right here Jesus provided a picture of how His entire mission and ministry was described elsewhere in the Bible. "Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself (the episode in John 13 is just one of many examples) in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross." (Ph. 2:6-8 NLT)

It takes humility to become a genuine follower of Jesus. Why's that? Many people are too proud to accept what only God can do for them. They find it very difficult to believe they can't deserve or earn an eternal relationship with God through their own good behavior. They have a very low appreciation of God's absolute, blazing, perfect, and

unapproachable holiness and how far short they fall of it. Frankly, they're offended by the cross and the notion that someone – anyone – had to die for them in order for God to find them acceptable. They assume their own efforts to be good or moral should be acceptable to God. And some of them truly are very moral, good people from a human standard. But Scripture makes it plain that it's God's standard that matters not our own. I guarantee most of your neighbors, people you work with or go to school with, whoever – if asked – will tell you they hope to get into Heaven one day because God has deemed them to be good enough. They think they can earn or deserve God, Heaven, salvation, and eternal life, whatever. If that was true, then Jesus died for no purpose on Friday of this week. The cross was a mistake that shouldn't have happened. But the Bible's message is that it was necessary for Jesus to humble and disgrace Himself on the cross – to serve us - by doing for us what we could never do for ourselves.

There's a kind of humility that saves us. To be more precise, it's a kind of humility that makes it possible to receive the salvation Jesus offers. Only God's grace can save me, not my humility. That's true. But until and unless I'm willing to receive as a gift what Jesus did for me on the cross, I can't be saved. Until and unless I'm willing to see the offer of my own morality to God - my own goodness - as a hopelessly inadequate reason for Him to accept me, I can't experience salvation. Until and unless I put my faith in what Jesus did for me rather than what I can do for myself, I miss the salvation God offers. That requires a kind of humility. I like how the old hymn writer expressed it, "Not the labors of my hands, can fulfill the law's demands; could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow, all for sin could not atone; Thou must save and Thou alone. Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling." (Augustus Toplady)

Jesus said to Peter, “Unless I wash you, you won’t belong to me.” (Jo. 13:8 NLT) It was as if Jesus said to him, “Peter, are you going to be too proud to let me do this for you? If you are, you will lose everything.” Unless Peter allowed Jesus to serve him in ways that only Jesus could serve Him – paying the debt of his sin, being His substitute on the cross – Peter could not share in the life only Jesus could provide. If you resist or reject that offer – if you find it offensive to your pride, inappropriate, or unthinkable – then you will miss out on the salvation Jesus provides. There are just some things only Jesus can do for you. Be realistic enough and humble enough to admit it. Yes, God loves you regardless, but your humility will open the door to all the fullness of God's love, grace, and life. God offers you salvation. Don't push it away by misplaced pride!

Comedian Jay Leno once conducted a "man-on-the-street" interview by asking random people to name one of the Ten Commandments. The most common response was something that wasn't even on God's original list—"God helps those who help themselves." That phrase, which is often used to emphasize a get-your-act-together approach to salvation, is often attributed to the Bible. News flash! It's not in there! Where did it come from then? It was a 17<sup>th</sup> century English thinker by the name of Algernon Sidney who's actually been credited with the now familiar wording, "God helps those who help themselves." Benjamin Franklin later used it in his Poor Richard's Almanac and it's been widely quoted ever since. A passage with similar sentiment can be found in the Quran, "Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they

change what is in themselves." But that phrase never appears in the Bible. When it comes to salvation, to being right with God, to being acceptable to God, to getting into Heaven, to obtaining eternal life - "God helps those who help themselves" - is the exact opposite of the Bible's message.

At the time, Peter still didn't get it. He thought Jesus was talking about literal feet. "Hey, if that's the only way to share life with You, Jesus, give me a complete bath!" Jesus' response is a bit hard to understand because it had a double meaning. He said, "A person who has bathed all over does not need to wash, except for the feet, to be entirely clean. (Jesus responded to Peter's literalness here. "Peter, you had a bath before you got here. All you need to be clean physically is to have your feet washed.") And you disciples are clean, (Physically, yes, but Jesus also knew that these men would receive the spiritual benefits of the cross in the next 24 hours. They would be humble enough to allow Jesus to do for them what only He could do.) but not all of you.' For Jesus knew who would betray him. That is what he meant when he said, 'Not all of you are clean. (Jesus knew one of the twelve, Judas, would reject the salvation offered to Him through Jesus)" (Jo 13:10-11 NLT) It was irrelevant if Peter and the other disciples understood what Jesus was doing right then and there. Jesus even said, "You don't understand now what I am doing, but someday you will." (Jo. 13:7 NLT) After the crucifixion and resurrection, they – except for Judas – would understand fully the depth of Jesus' love and humility. They would enter fully into the salvation He offered. There's another facet of humility demonstrated in this remarkable story.

### **THE HUMILITY THAT SERVES OTHERS.**

If Jesus stood here before us literally and physically this morning, how many of you would be eager to wash His feet as an act of worship and devotion? Of course! What if instead we had a footwashing ceremony – as some churches do - here today? How many of you would be eager and excited to wash each other's feet? That's what I thought! We would love to wash Jesus' feet, but instead we're commanded to wash each other's feet. It's wonderful to serve Jesus, isn't it? Here's the problem. To serve Jesus we have to serve sinful, mixed up, broken human beings! Another reason Jesus washed the disciples' feet was to demonstrate the importance of serving others and, also, to provide an example, a picture, an illustration of what it means to serve others. Here's several truths we can glean by meditating on this passage.

First, you're like Jesus when you demonstrate the spiritual greatness by being a servant. According to Luke's version of this very same scene, the disciples were still having arguments with each other over who was the greatest, the most important, and the most favored disciple among them. "Then they began to argue among themselves about who would be the greatest among them." (Lk 22:24 NLT) Can you imagine? It's the Last Supper, the night before the cross, and these dopes are trying to one up each other! Maybe that's what prompted Jesus to do what He did. Maybe He just got fed up with their childish self-centeredness and decided to drive home a lesson they'd never forget. What was the lesson? Jesus had already told them, "You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under

them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mt. 20:25-28 NLT) It’s different in the Kingdom of God! Being a leader looks like being a servant. Being a servant looks like being a leader. Do you want God’s approval? Do you want to receive God’s medal for spiritual greatness? Do you want to hear God say, “Well done?” Focus on serving others in His Name.

Second, you’re like Jesus when you’re motivated by love to serve others. “Before the Passover celebration, Jesus knew that his hour had come to leave this world and return to his Father. He had loved his disciples during his ministry on earth, and now he loved them to the very end.” (Jo. 13:1-2 NLT) He demonstrated that love by washing their feet. Jesus didn’t come to control people, dominate people, or manipulate people. Instead, He came to love people, add value to people, and save people. That was a new, revolutionary concept back in Jesus’ day. Jesus redefined leadership as serving other people by loving them. This touches every conceivable area of life. Husbands, our job is not to dominate our wives and get them to meet our needs. Demanding our kids obey us is not our first duty. We are called to serve our wives and children in love. Wives, your job is not to manipulate and control your husband and kids. You are to serve them in love. Imagine how your place of work would be transformed if everyone’s attitude was about serving each other in love. So, let it begin with you. Imagine this or any church if everyone’s attitude was about serving others in love. Instead of coming to church thinking, “I wonder who can bless my life today,” we’d approach church thinking, “I wonder whose life I can bless today.”

Third, you’re like Jesus when you possess a security that frees you to serve effectively. Don’t miss the importance of what’s said just before Jesus washed His disciples’ feet. “Jesus knew that the Father had given him authority over everything and that he had come from God and would return to God.” (Jo 13:3 NLT) It wasn’t in forgetting who He was that Jesus washed the disciples’ feet, but rather in full comprehension and consciousness of it. He didn’t forget He was God and so humbled Himself. It was because He was God and wished to act as God that He did it. And then, instead of using His exalted position to dominate, control, and manipulate people, He used it to serve others in love. Jesus knew His exalted position and refused to flaunt it. He knew His calling and was willing to be faithful to it. Jesus knew His mission and was willing to fulfill it. Jesus had no fear of becoming anyone’s doormat by being a servant. He knew who He was. Show me a man who abuses his wife or children thinking that’s what it means to be “head of the home” and I’ll show you just an insecure little boy emotionally. Show me a woman who has to manipulate and connive to get her way at home, and I’ll show you just an insecure little girl emotionally. Show me a person at church who must get his or her own way, who must be at the center of attention, and who always needs to be on the receiving end of ministry, and I’ll show you a person who stays a baby Christian forever. Christ-like servants are into serving, not being served.

Fourth, you’re like Jesus when you initiate serving ministry to others. If anyone deserved to be on the receiving end of ministry on the night before the cross, it was

Jesus. Instead He took the initiative to grab a towel, pour water into a basin, and wash dirty feet. Christ-like servants don't wait to be served and don't expect to be served. Instead, they look for ways to serve others. They initiate ministry. They reach out in Jesus' love in their home, in their neighborhood, in their church – wherever. Fifth, you're like Jesus when you receive serving ministry from others. That was actually demonstrated by Peter rather than Jesus in this story, but it's important, nevertheless. At first it felt highly inappropriate and awkward to let Jesus wash his feet. Jesus had to set him straight. Christ-like servants aren't too proud or too insecure to receive love and ministry from others. Allowing yourself to be served can be a form of serving.

Finally, you're like Jesus when your servant lifestyle results in a blest life. Jesus said right here, "Now that you know these things, God will bless you for doing them." (Jo. 13:17 NLT) Jesus didn't mean you're guaranteed an easy life. He made it very clear that suffering, trouble, and heartache will be the part of everyone's life – even every Christian's life. He didn't mean a financially prosperous life – lots of money, a big house, or material possessions. If I understand Jesus correctly here, He says that obeying God is the key to having a blest life. A blest life is a life that's right with God. Out of a life that's right with God flows healthier relationships with others – your spouse, your kids, the people you work or go to school with, the people you worship with. Out of a life that's right with God will flow grace in difficult times, courage to face life's challenges, joy even in the midst of sadness and loss. Out of a life that's right with God will come the opportunity to contribute to something vastly bigger and more wonderful than any of us can possibly imagine – the Kingdom of God. Out of a life that's right with God will come meaning, purpose, and a joy that lasts. That's a blest life – a life in step with God, a life that dances to the rhythm of the universe, a life that follows in the footsteps of the Leader of the universe – the Lord Jesus Christ – who is a Servant.

One of Christianity's great leaders was the late Dawson Trotman who founded The Navigators Ministries back in the 1930s. Two Navigators coaches have helped us – and continue to help us - build a discipleship culture here at our church. Trotman helped Billy Graham design the discipleship materials Graham used in his crusade follow up on new converts. Trotman was visiting Taiwan on one of his overseas trips. During the visit he hiked with a Taiwanese pastor back into one of the mountain villages to meet with some of the Christians living there. The roads and trails were wet, and their shoes became very muddy. Later, someone asked this Taiwanese pastor what he remembered most about Dawson Trotman. Without hesitation the man replied, "He cleaned my shoes." He shared how surprised he was when he got up the next morning and realized this Christian leader from America had arisen before him and cleaned the mud from his shoes. Servanthood marked Dawson Trotman throughout his Christian life. He loved doing things for people. He found enjoyment in discovering little needs they had and then making it his objective to meet those needs. He died as he lived, actually giving his life to rescue someone else from drowning.

Peter asked Jesus, "Are you going to wash my feet?" There's a humility that saves us and a humility that serves others. When we become servants of Jesus, we become servants of others.