Jesus Washes His Disciples’ Feet

John 13:1-17

Key Verse:13:14 “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet.”

We call John chapter 13-17 Jesus’ “upper room lecture” or the “upper room dialogues”. The night before he was arrested, Jesus went to an upper room, probably Mark’s upper room, with his disciples and ate the Last Supper with them. In this room Jesus taught them many things: A New command (13), the Holy Spirit (14,16), the Parable of the vine and branches (15), and his priestly prayer (17). In the midst of this lecture Jesus washed his disciples’ feet, and predicted Judas’ betrayal and Peter’s denial (13). What Jesus did for his disciples was one surprise after another. By doing so Jesus expressed his unfailing love for them and fulfilled all the duties and prophecies as the Son of God. In today’s passage Jesus washes his disciples’ feet. We’ll study how and why Jesus washed their feet and how we can appreciate this and apply it to our daily life.

It was just before the Passover Festival. The Jews celebrated the Passover Festival according to Moses’ law. The word “Passover” was when the angel of God passed over when he saw the blood of the lamb which had been stained on the doorposts of the Israelites during God’s judgment on Egyptians. “*When I see the blood, I will pass over you.*” (Ex 12:13) The Jews ate the Passover meal on Thursday evening with lamb meat, unleavened bread, herbs, and wine. Jesus wanted to eat the Passover meal with his disciples. This meal was his last meal with them on this earth. So we call it “the Last Supper.”

Jesus would be soon the Passover Lamb for the sins of the world. John the Baptist said earlier in John 1:29, “*The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*.” Jesus would be slaughtered as the Lamb of God. In the Old Testament, as the blood of the animals which the high priests offered in the temple cleansed his people’s sin, so the blood of the Son of God cleanses the sins of the whole world. Paul described Jesus as the Passover Lamb who has been sacrificed. (1 Co 5:7)

Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Jesus knew that he would die soon and go back to the Father after his resurrection. People usually become serious at the moment of their death. Their reactions at their last moment on this earth are various. What did Jesus do when he knew his last moment on this earth had come? Look at verse 1c. “***Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.***” Jesus loved his disciples to the end, even at the last minutes of his life. Jesus’ love for his disciples was not swayed or reduced or weakened by his condition. The Bible says that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. (Heb 13:8) Like a loving mother who expresses her love for her children unto the last minute of her life, Jesus loved his disciples to the end.

How did Jesus love his disciples to the end? Let us read verses 3-5. “***Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him***.” Jesus was like a mother who is taking care of her children. When I was young, my home country was poor. There were not many paved playgrounds in my hometown and we played in the dirt. When I came home with my dusty and muddy hands, my mother poured water into a basin and washed my dirty hands and feet. I believe that we all remember our mother’s washing love. Jesus began to wash his disciple’s feet one by one and dried them with the towel. Washing their feet must have tickled them, but no one dared to say ‘no’ or ‘stop.’ They were moved by Jesus’ motherly washing love.

What was Peter’s reaction when his turn approached? Peter said, “***Lord, are you going to wash my feet***?” (6) Peter thought that Jesus should not wash his feet because Jesus was his master and Lord. In Jesus’ day slaves or servants washed their master’s feet when they came home. Washing feet was the duty of a slave or servant, not of the master or teacher. Jesus replied, “***You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.***” (7) Jesus meant that Peter should obey him even though he didn’t understand. What was Peter’s answer? Look at verse 8. “***No,” said Peter, “you shall never wash my feet.***” Peter strongly rejected Jesus’ favor. He respected Jesus as his master and Lord, but didn’t accept Jesus’ humble serving. Peter loved Jesus by expressing his unchanging loyalty to him. But his human loyalty disturbed the way of Jesus. In the past, Peter rebuked Jesus when Jesus talked about the way of cross. Peter thought that this should not be done to his lovely master. But Jesus rebuked Peter saying, “*Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but things of men.*” (Mt 16:23) Human loyalty without spiritual understanding often disturbs the work of God.

How did Jesus respond to Peter? Let us read verse 8b. “***Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me***.” What did Jesus mean when he said, “you have no part with me? NLT version says, “*Unless I wash you, you won’t belong to me*.” This is the matter of Peter’s identity. If Jesus did not wash Peter’s feet, Peter could not become a child of God or his disciple. Indeed Jesus came to this world to wash away our sins. This is the redemptive purpose of his coming into this world. Washing our feet has not only the purpose of atoning for our sins, but also of sharing his spiritual inheritance, the kingdom of God. ESV says, “*If I do not wash you, you have no share with me*.” When we combine these two versions, we make the conclusion: unless Jesus washes us, we are still in our sins and we cannot become children of God and will not inherit the kingdom of God. Wow! Being washed by Jesus is a serious matter for our eternal life.

Suppose our sins are not washed away, the coming of Jesus will be in vain. His suffering and sacrificial death on the cross was also useless, too. When our sins are washed and forgiven, we have a part with Jesus. Our relationship with Jesus becomes the vine and branch relationship. Our relationship with Jesus develops as a deep covenant relationship, not a superficial relationship. In order to deepen our relationship with God, Jesus needs to wash our sins and our sins need to be washed away. Without this washing process, we have no part with God. In the same way in order to develop genuine relationship with others, we need to wash other’s sins and our sins also need to be washed. We need to forgive other’s sin and we need also to be forgiven. Through these mutual washing processes, our relationships become genuine and solid.

Exposing our dirty feet for washing is not easy. Dirty feet are our painful, shameful, and wounded mistakes. For someone to expose them is shameful, humiliating, and fearful. No one wants to expose their negative images and tell their dark life story in public. But, in order to be washed we show our dirty feet. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Jesus came to wash our dirty feet. This is why Jesus came to this world and died on the cross. John the Apostle said. “*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.*” (1Jn 1:8-10) If we don’t come to Jesus to be washed, we cannot be free from the power of sin. If our sins are not washed away, we cannot inherit the kingdom of God. If we say that we are not a sinner, we become a liar. We have no part with Jesus. We will be thrown into the fire of burning sulfur. (Jn 15:6, Rev 21:8)

Peter was shocked by Jesus’ word that he would have no part with Jesus unless Jesus washed him. What was his response? Look at verse 9. “***Then, Lord,” Simon Peter replied, “not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!***” Here we learn Peter’s simplicity. He thought that his loyalty was doubted by Jesus. So he asked Jesus to wash not only his feet, but his whole body. Still, he was spiritually ignorant. He did not understand the deep spiritual meaning of washing. ***Jesus 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.***” (10) What did Jesus mean when he said about ‘having a bath’ (*louo*) and ‘washing their feet’ (*nipto*)? Having bath means Jesus’ initial and fundamental and complete act of atonement for our sins. In other words it means Jesus’ once for all work on the cross for our salvation which cannot be repeated. Washing their feet means continuous cleansing our subsequent sins after our conversion. It requires our daily repentance and forgiveness. Once we take a shower or have a bath, we need only to wash our hands and feet when we come home. Our hands and feet often become dirty and smelly because they are exposed and used more than any other part of body. Theologically speaking, having a bath is the process of justification whereas washing feet is the process of sanctification. When we declare with our mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead, we are justified through faith in him. (Ro 3:24, 10:9) This is the moment of our conversion and regeneration as a Christian. But justification is not all conditions for our Christians. We must grow spiritually as a newborn baby grows. Through this process of sanctification we grow in Christ’s divine image and character.

Jesus continued, “***And you are clean, though not every one of you.”*** (10) When Jesus said this, he knew who was going to betray him. Verse 11 says, “***For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean***.” Jesus pointed out Judas Iscariot. In verse 2 when the evening meal was in progress, the devil had already prompted Judas. (2) Jesus gave many chances for Judas to repent and turn his heart to him (Jn 6:67-71, 12:4-6) But Judas did not repent. When he loved the world more than Jesus and did not receive him as the Lord and Savior, he betrayed Jesus. He became a tool of Satan. It is amazing that Jesus washed Judas’ feet, too even though he knew that Judas would betray him soon. Jesus washed the sin of his betrayer. There is no one who cannot come to Jesus to be washed. Jesus washed even his enemy’s feet.

There was another purpose for washing his disciples’ feet: Jesus set an example for them to wash other’s feet. Look at verses 12-17. “***When 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. “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.***” No one wants to wash other’s feet because it is a humble and lowly job. As I mentioned before, slaves or servants usually wash their master’s feet. None of Jesus’ disciples wanted to humble themselves to wash other’s feet. All of them wanted to be washed, not to wash. But Jesus said, “*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many*.” (Mk 10:35)

Even the Son of God Jesus washed his disciple’s feet. So his disciples should wash other’s feet as their Lord and teacher did. What does “wash one another’s feet” mean? This means to *forgive* other’s sin, *forebear* their weak points, and *forfeit* the record of their wrongdoings. We often become generous with our sins, but strict toward others. But, in order to obey Jesus’ words, it should be reversed: We must become strict with our sins, but generous toward others.

In today’s passage Jesus washed his disciple’s feet and taught them how to follow his example. Jesus wants us to expose our dirty feet to be washed. This is the reason why Jesus came to this world. When our sins are washed away by the blood of Jesus, the relationship with Jesus becomes a vine and branch relationship. May God help us to come to Jesus with confidence and freedom! Blessed are those whose sins are cleansed and forgiven by Jesus! Amen!