

### Follow the Lord's Example and Wash One Another's Feet

#### John 13:12-17

John 13:12-17 - *"So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?"<sup>13</sup> You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am.<sup>14</sup> If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.<sup>15</sup> For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.<sup>16</sup> Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him.<sup>17</sup> If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."*

#### Background Notes

In verse 12, some translations use the word "recline" instead of "sat down." Why? I think most of you are aware that in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, people didn't sit on chairs at a table for a meal like we do today. They reclined on backless couches around a low table. The couches were placed at right angles to the table, with the diner's heads near the table and their feet away from the table. Thus, when you think of Mary of Bethany anointing the Lord's feet with the costly perfume and wiping them with her hair (John 12), don't picture the Lord sitting on a chair pulled up to a table. Mary didn't have to crawl under the table to anoint His feet. No, she was at the far end of the couch, and there she anointed His feet and wiped them with her hair. And other accounts mention that she also anointed His head.

At the end of verse 12, the Lord asked His disciples, *"Do you know what I have done to you?"* Do you understand? This verse clearly shows that there is a deeper meaning to the foot washing. If there were no symbolism, then the simple answer would be, "Yes Lord, we know what You've done. You've humbled yourself. You've taken a servant's place to wash the dirt off our feet." Well, the Lord was doing more than that, and He indicated that there was this deeper meaning.

Go back to verse 7: *"Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this."* We have seen that the symbolism in the foot washing refers to the Lord cleansing us from day-to-day sin. Now the Lord is moving on to say that we should wash one another's feet. *"You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet"* (v13-14).

What does it mean to "wash one another's feet"? Is this an ordinance that the local church should perform on a regular basis? Are we supposed to literally wash one another's feet?

## Doctrinal / Teaching Points

### 1. Washing one another's feet is not an ordinance for the Church.

Some Christians believe that, in this event, the Lord instituted an ordinance for the Church for all time. Those Christians regularly practice literal foot washing as an ordinance, similar to baptism and the Lord's Supper. I don't think that it's wrong to literally wash one another's feet as a gesture or symbol that we're willing to serve one another. A few years ago some students at Emmaus had a foot washing in the dorm. It wasn't a school function - they did it on their own, to indicate their willingness to serve one another. However, while it is not wrong to literally wash one another's feet, I don't believe that the Lord intended foot washing to become an ordinance for the Church. Let me give you three reasons:

1. The early Church didn't practice foot washing as an ordinance. There is no indication in the rest of the New Testament or in early Church literature that the early believers practiced foot washing as an ordinance. Now it stands to reason that if the Lord meant that foot washing should be an ordinance, there would be some record in the Epistles that it was practiced as an ordinance in the Church. In addition, there is no record from early Church literature (and we have plenty of early writings) that foot washing was practiced as an ordinance in the churches. There is no indication that it was viewed as an ordinance in the early Church.
2. The only other mention of foot washing in the New Testament is clearly not the practice of an ordinance. Do you know where it's mentioned? Foot washing is mentioned in 1 Timothy 5:10, and it is not mentioned as an ordinance! 1 Timothy 5:10 is a description of the godly widow who has shown hospitality by washing the saints' feet.
3. The Lord's explanation of foot washing indicates it is not an ordinance. Look again at verses 15-16: *"For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him."* The Lord's explained what it means to wash one another's feet. We are to follow His example and humbly serve one another in love - not celebrate it literally, as a formal ordinance! If the Lord had an ordinance in mind, then verse 16 would just not make sense: *"Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him."*

So for these reasons, then, I believe that foot washing is not an ordinance. It's an illustration. We should follow our Lord's example by humbly serving one another in love. Washing one another's feet is not an ordinance for the church.

### 2. Washing one another's feet is not an option for the Christian.

The Lord didn't say, "Wash one another's feet if you feel like it" or "Wash one another's feet if you have nothing else to do." No. We are responsible to wash one another's feet when it's needed. And it's not an option! Look at verses 14-15: *"If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you*

*an example, that you should do as I have done to you.*” And verse 17: *“If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.”* We will be blessed if we obey the Lord by washing one another’s feet.

Washing feet is not always pleasant - right? To wash another brother or sister’s feet we must be at their feet, and that certainly takes humility. And dirty feet can be pretty ugly, and dirty feet don’t smell very nice. So it’s not always pleasant to wash a brother or sister’s feet. Humbly serving one another in love is not a pleasant task.

All right then - how do we wash one another’s feet? In actual practice, what does it mean to wash one another’s feet? In general, it means to humbly serve one another in love, but more specifically it means applying the cleansing of the Word of God to the lives of our brothers and sisters. **Applying the Word humbly, and with love!**

How does the Lord wash our feet when we pick up dirt from the ways of this world? Primarily He uses Scripture - the Word of God. Ephesians 5:25-26 says, *“...Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word...”* And Psalm 119:9 tells us, *“How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word.”*

Brothers or sisters who have “dirt on their feet” need to have their feet washed, and we’ve been given the responsibility to apply the Word to help wash their feet. But that’s not always easy. Many brothers and sisters don’t like to have their feet washed! Especially by fellow believers! How would you like other believers to apply the water of the Word to you? But we have that responsibility. It’s not an option.

When we wash feet, we need to remember what the Lord Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: *“Why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye’; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye”* (Matthew 7:3-5).

The Lord meant that we need to see clearly so that we can remove the speck of sawdust (the “dirt”) out of our brother or sister’s eye. But notice - the Lord didn’t say, “Don’t worry about the speck of sawdust in your brother or sisters eye – forget about it.” No, He indicated that we are to help them by removing it. **But**, He said, “Before you start taking the speck out of someone else’s eye, make sure that you get the logs, beams, or telephone poles out of your own eye first! *Then* (and only then) you’ll be able to see clearly to help others!”

In other words, we need to remove the sin in our own lives before we begin removing the speck – or washing the feet - for other believers!

Washing one another’s feet is not an option for the Christian. We have that responsibility, and it’s an awesome responsibility.

## **Practical Application**

### **Let's not wash one another's feet with "scalding hot" or "freezing cold" water!**

Did you ever put your feet in a tub of water that you thought was going to be nice and warm, but it turned out to be either boiling hot? Or icy cold? The wrong temperature will cause you to pull away! Now do you see where this practical application comes from?

The primary way in which we wash one another's feet from the dirt of this world is just the way the Lord washes our feet. We gently apply the Word! But here is the point: we need to **apply the right word**, and we need to **apply it with love!**

Our goal is not to punish, but to help restore that believer to fellowship with the Lord, so we need to apply the appropriate Scripture for the situation. Not "boiling hot Scripture" or "icy cold Scripture" that may hurt – or even damage - the person who needs our help. We need to prayerfully use just the right water temperature for that particular person and that particular situation!

A few years ago a student had to leave Emmaus because his "feet had become soiled." I wrote a letter to him after he left, and I applied the "water of the Word." I used Scripture. I didn't use 2 Timothy 2:19 which says, "Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity." I could have used that verse, but I felt that the temperature of that particular "water" was too "hot" for his situation. The student knew that he was wrong, and he knew that he had to get his act together.

The Scriptures I used in the letter emphasized God's love, His willingness to forgive sin, and His desire to restore the sinner to fellowship with Him. Other friends wrote to him along the same line, using the right temperature of cleansing water for that situation. It's great to report that the young man is once again walking with the Lord!

Let's be careful not to wash one another's feet with scalding hot water or freezing cold water. How do we treat a believer who has decided to get a divorce, for example? What about a Christian girl who is pregnant and unmarried and afraid? What about a believer who is desperately struggling with an addiction to drugs, or pornography? Do we just quote a Scripture and then turn a cold shoulder? Or do we carefully and thoughtfully check out the situation, and lovingly take care to use just the right temperature when we apply the cleansing water of the Word?

Let's not wash one another's feet with "scalding hot" or "freezing cold" water!