

Happiness and a Pair of Dirty Feet

John 13:1-20

Introduction

We arrive today, at chapter 13 of John's good news. And, I want to inform you that John, the inspired writer, changes the playback speed on this drama from fast forward to slow motion. The first twelve chapters of this gospel replay nearly three and a half years. The next five chapters will replay only one day. Although the speed shifts into slow motion, the color is brilliant and the emotional level will reach unbelievable intensity.

Actually, it is time for some very dramatic, life changing action. After thousands of hours of personal instruction; after three years of intense discipleship; after hundreds of lessons and stories, you would have to conclude, "The disciples are just not getting it; they are not catching on."

It was time for some unforgettable action.

The need for action is illustrated by a man who was stuck in the middle of the road with his donkey. The donkey had planted his feet firmly on the ground and would not move, no matter what the man did. The man stood there shouting at the donkey and pulling on the rope, but the donkey would not take another step forward. While this was going on, an old, sun baked farmer came down the road and immediately sized up the problem. "Ya want some help?" he asked.

"I sure could use some, but I don't think it will do any good. I've been shouting at this donkey for half an hour, and he just won't budge."

"I can fix that," the farmer said.

He went over to the side of the road, picked up a big stick, came back and hit the donkey between the eyes. After that, he stood back and said, in a casual, normal voice, "Get".

The donkey immediately started off. "I don't understand it," said the owner, "I pulled on his rope, I got right up in his face and yelled at him, and he acted as if he didn't even hear me. You spoke in a normal tone of voice, and he moved off."

"That's true," the farmer said, "but first, I got his attention."

Now, if you think the Lord does not need to get the attention of His disciples, think again.

The problems become painfully obvious in the latter part of Matthew's gospel. Turn to chapter 20. Here, James and John, these big husky sons of thunder, come up to Jesus with their little mother. The mother pulls Jesus aside, with her two grown sons. Look at verses 20 and 21.

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Him with her sons, bowing down, and making a request of Him. And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to Him, "Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left."

Can you imagine? There these two grown men stand, probably looking a little sheepish.

Let us put this in perspective. It would be, gentlemen, like your dear little momma taking you by the hand, marching into the office of the president of your company, and saying, "Sir, my son is the finest boy in the whole world. I can't imagine why you

can't make him vice president of this company. Will you, huh?"

The more I thought about it, however, moms will do stuff like that, if you let them. Every good mother is a natural born cheerleader who believes her child ought to play first string – or something is wrong with the coach.

My children's greatest fan is their mother. She even got an award at our son's soccer party for being the best "cheerer"!

My mom is incredible. I believe, when I turned twenty-five, a big eraser wiped across her mind and erased her memory of every bad thing I ever did as a kid. She cannot remember any of them. In fact, to hear her talk now, you would think that, growing up through elementary school and high school, I was nothing but a model student, citizen, and son. I am not about to jog her memory either. I am enjoying it!

So, in light of the way mothers are by nature, I do not think anything bad about James and John's mother doing what she did. But, I cannot believe James and John actually stood there and let her carry on.

Now notice the other disciples reaction, in verse 24.

And hearing this, the ten became indignant with the two brothers.

This is interesting because it implies that James and John did not just stand there and allow her to do it, they put her up to it! A couple of reasons for this are:

- They are wanting prestige.

According to Luke, chapter 22, just prior to John's description of the last supper, the disciples had been arguing over which of them would be considered the greatest in the kingdom.

- They are also wanting pre-eminence.

In other words, just days before the crucifixion, the disciples were anything but ready to carry on the ministry. Why? Because they still had not caught on to the primary quality of character found in the Lord.

Paul wrote, in Philippians, chapter 2, verses 5b through 8,

. . . Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, .

. . . He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death . . .

The disciples were so unready, that, I imagine, had the church in Jerusalem been created at Pentecost with the disciples still vying for prestige and pre-eminence, they would have argued over who had the most converts, whose particular language had reached the most Gentiles, and who should be in charge. The church would have self-destructed one month after it had been created!

It is time for some dramatic action; it is time to get their attention in a way they will never forget!

The Context

Let me give you the context. Look at John, chapter 13, verses 1 and 2.

Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He should depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. And during supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him.

Twelve disciples – but one is a traitor!

Now I have to stop here because this verse convicts me like no other. If you put the gospel accounts together, I believe that you will discover the progression showing Jesus actually washed Judas' feet. I believe that Judas departed the scene before Jesus instituted the Lord's Table, but he was a recipient of Christ's servitude.

Skip over and look at verses 18 and 19.

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." 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.

In other words, "Only God can predict the future, so I'm going to predict certain things that, when they happen, you'll recognize that as one more evidence of my Deity."

Continue to verse 20.

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who received whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.

Then the prediction is in verse 21.

When Jesus had said this, He became troubled in spirit, and testified, and said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, that one of you will betray Me.”

In a later discussion, we will look at the life of Judas Iscariot. But, as it relates to what is just about to happen, I have one big question!

How do you wash the feet of a Judas Iscariot? I know – you would treat them roughly, pinch his corns, and bend his toes. Or, better yet, you would empty the basin and fill it with scalding hot water or cold water with chunks of ice. At the least, you would put him last in line, so that the water is muddy dirty and the drying towel is already wringing wet. And, you would make sure you accidentally slosh muddy water on his clothing. That is how we would want to do it.

Besides, we would never wash the feet of those who only respond by giving us a swift kick in return. No! We wash beautiful, loving feet. We wash the feet of friends, not the feet of betrayers and faithless cowards. We do not wash the feet of disloyal deniers.

Jesus is about to! Go back and look at verses 3 and 4.

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God, and was going back to God, rose from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself about.

Stop! We are so quick to move on in the story that we miss something important. Why did John take us through Christ’s résumé, in verse 3? Look again at verse 3 and continue to verses 4 and 5a.

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God, and was going back to God, rose from supper . . . and began to wash the disciples’ feet . . .

I think John spelled out Jesus’ résumé, in verse 3, to reveal that Jesus should have received special treatment – He is related to God the Father. We are told in that verse, “. . . He had come forth from God, and was going back to God”.

Let me try to illustrate what John is doing, in this verse.

When my twin sons were in first grade, they had the same Sunday school teacher.

By the way, let me make a general disclaimer to anything you teachers might hear in Sunday school. I am still smarting from what one of my daughters told her teacher, when she was four-years-old. She informed her teacher, in front of the class, that her daddy had a drinking problem. I do not know if it was prayer request time or what, but she said, “Pray for my daddy, he has a drinking problem.”

The only drinking problem I have is drinking too many Pepsis with caffeine, which will give me a stomach ache. That ends that rumor!

Anyway, my boys had a new teacher on this particular Sunday. A super college gal who would tell me this story a few weeks later. The rule is that the kids have to wait until a parent comes to pick them up after class. When class ended, my boys were ready to bolt out the door to freedom. The new teacher stopped them. “You can’t leave,” she said.

They protested, “Yes, we always do.”

“Not anymore!” she firmly said.

One of my sons put his hands on his first grade hips and said, with real authority, “Do you know who my father is?”

She said, “No I don’t. Who is he?”

He said, “Pastor Davey.”

I wish he could have said, “The king of the church,” but that title is already taken!

I said to the teacher, “I hope you didn’t change your stance.”

She said, “No. In fact, I shocked him. I just looked right back at him and said, ‘I don’t care who your father is, you’re not leaving this room!’”

Good answer! Bravo!

We adults have the same problem. “Do you know who I am? I’m the nephew of a man whose second cousin was the babysitter for the Mayor’s kids.”

Big deal!

It is as if John introduces this incredible story with the preface, “And to think who Jesus is!”

Jesus is sovereign God! And, verse 3 is telling us every reason in the world why Jesus should have had

the disciples wash His feet, instead of Him washing their feet.

John is reminding us of who Jesus' Father is.

The Culture

Now, before we go much further, I want you to have the cultural picture in your mind's eye.

The roads of Palestine were not surfaced or cleaned. In dry weather, they were inches deep in dust and, when it rained, the streets were covered with gooey mud. The shoes of the common people were ordinary sandals that gave little, if any, protection.

For this reason, there were always great water pots at the door of a house, as well as a servant, on call, to come with a ladle and a towel to wash the dirty feet of the guests, as they came in.

One water pot – but the servant is missing!

Now, in this story, it is clear that there is a bowl and a towel, but Jesus' little company of disciples had no servant.

This is bad news. In those days, people lay on a simple mat on the floor, propping themselves up with an elbow. The table was a simple, low, rectangular block of wood. This position meant that if your feet were not clean, your neighbor was very aware of it.

But no one is moving! It seems that the disciples were not even going to wash their own feet, and certainly no one, for the moment, was volunteering to wash anybody else's.

Notice verses 4 and 5 again.

[Jesus] rose from supper, . . .

This indicates that they have just sat down to eat or that they are nearly finished.

. . . and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself about. Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.

Now, if you are wondering why He did this, look ahead to verse 12.

And so when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments, and reclined at the table again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?"

Obviously the answer is, "You washed our feet."

Well, Jesus must have something else in mind or He would not have asked such a simple question. Here it is, in verses 13 and 14.

You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

Now, some wonderful Christians would say that Jesus is instituting another ordinance of the church, in these verses, that we ought to wash one another's feet. The truth is, He did not give a command, He gave an example.

This was not a mandate, it was a model. In fact, notice the key word "example," in verse 15.

For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.

In other words, there can be thousands of ways to humbly serve – Jesus is simply saying, "Do it!"

It is interesting that there are only two times in the whole New Testament that clearly state we are to follow Christ's example. In this verse, it relates to service. A second reference, in I Peter, relates to suffering. We are to follow Christ's example – He hung on a cross.

While we do not pursue death by crucifixion, we do pursue obedience in suffering. While we may not wash dirty feet, we do pursue humility in serving.

So, Jesus is teaching them to serve humbly.

And, did you notice that He does not make a big announcement? He never stood up and said, "Listen up, men, I am now going to demonstrate humility – notice my servanthood."

No, He simply slipped away from His place at the table, put a towel around His waist, and, with a basin in His hand, He quietly began to move from one man to the next.

I believe you could have heard a pin drop. Eating stopped; mouths fell open; eyes turned down in shame, as they saw their Master become their slave. Perhaps some began to softly weep. Here is God washing their dirty feet.

The Concept

Then, here comes Peter to illustrate the concept. Peter is not weeping, he is overwrought. Look at verse 6.

And so He came to Simon Peter. [Peter] said to Him, “Lord, do You wash my feet?”

I think it would be correct to read it this way, “Lord . . . do *You* wash *My* feet? This isn’t right!”

Continue to verse 7, for Jesus’ answer.

Jesus answered and said to him, “What I do you do not realize now, but you shall understand hereafter.”

In other words, “I’ll explain later, Peter. In fact, seven verses later, I’ll spell it out for you.”

Verse 8a.

Peter said to Him, “Never shall You wash my feet!”

In the original language this is the double negative “ou me,” which is translated in other places as, “God forbid”. You could render this phrase, “Lord, there is absolutely no way in the world You’re going to wash my feet. With all due respect, the answer is, absolutely not!”

Perhaps Jesus leaned back on His heels and looked into Peter’s eyes and said very calmly, as recorded in verse 8b,

If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.

I believe the word “part” refers to fellowship. I will explain why in a moment.

Well Peter seems to get that point so he exclaims, in verse 9,

Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.

In other words, “Give me the whole treatment. I don’t want one square inch of my body to be dry.”

Two baths – but one is forever!

Now, the next verse is a very important verse. Look at verse 10.

Jesus said to him, “He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.”

This verse refers to two baths or two washings. They are two different Greek words as well. There is:

- the bath that totally cleanses – that one lasts forever, and
- another bath that cleans your feet – that one is needed daily.

The first is the bath of regeneration. You only need it once. You only need to be saved once, or as Paul wrote in Titus, chapter 3, verse 5,

He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration . . .

Then, there is the bath of restoration. You need that over and over again because fellowship must be restored again and again.

Now, there was one man in that room who had never had that spiritual bath, although his feet were clean. Look at verses 10b through 11.

“. . . and you are clean, but not all of you.” For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, “Not all of you are clean.”

Follow this closely. I believe that there are a lot of people who believe they are alright before God because they have asked Jesus to clean their feet, that is, they have confessed individual sins. They get on their knees and confess their sins, but they have never asked Jesus to save them; to give them a bath.

Now imagine that taking place in the physical world.

The other day, one of my kids was outside playing. He opened the little iron door, at the base of our fireplace, where I shovel the ashes. He covered himself completely with soot – piling the ashes on his head and rubbing them all over his body. He was pretending to be a monster – and it was scary! My wife went pale – I rushed to get the video camera. I am going to show that video to his children one day!

When it was supper time, I went out and turned on the water hose. There was no way his mother, or I, was going to allow him to take one step inside that house. So, I hosed him down and the ashes turned to mud and ran down his cheeks and body.

Now, imagine my son saying, “Look, Dad, just rinse off my feet and then, I’ll go in to supper; just clean off my feet.”

There are people who are desperately trying to keep their feet clean, who have never had the bath of regeneration. That is the message to the unbeliever.

What about the believer? Here is the message, “Peter, you can’t fellowship with Me with dirty feet.”

Here is how it works. You get a bath by being saved, but then, as you walk through life, you get your

feet dirty. Jesus is saying, “You can’t have communion with Me as long as you have dirty feet.”

Communion must be preceded by cleansing.

Some of you today, who are Christians, need your feet washed. The reason some of you are not serving the Lord is because you are out of fellowship. And you are out of fellowship because you are hiding sin – your feet are dirty.

The Lord will do the one you need. He loves you and the water is ready.

The Cure

Now, frankly, the primary message of this passage, the cure, is not having your feet washed, but washing someone else’s. Go back to verse 12b through 14.

Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.

Skip to verse 17.

If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

The word “blessed” is “markarios” in the Greek, which means, “happy, fulfilled”.

One example – but it guarantees happiness!

Do you want to be happy? Then be on the lookout for dirty feet.

Now, look at verse 17 again.

If you know these things, you are [happy] . .

Many Christians put the period there! *No!*

If you know these things, you are [happy] if you do them.

Happiness is not the result of information but application!

In the final analysis, happiness comes from doing these things. The fun comes when we roll up our sleeves, wrap the towel around our waist, and wash a few feet – quietly, graciously, cheerfully.

Application

Let me give a couple of application principles.

Washing feet means surrendering your privilege . .

1. Principle number one is, washing feet means surrendering your privilege to receive proper response.

We tend to wash the feet of those who will wash our feet in return. If you will wash the feet of only those who will return your acts of service with appreciation, love, and acceptance, you will never wash feet.

Many Christians will never wash feet because it does not return to them the kind of dividends they want out of life.

Think about it – Jesus washed all twelve pairs of dirty feet, and what was their response? Thomas still doubted him; Judas still betrayed Him; Peter still denied Him . . . but He washed them anyway.

Washing feet means surrendering your prerogative . . .

2. Principle number two is, washing feet means surrendering your prerogative to choose whom you serve, when you serve, and how you serve.

If you will only serve at the feet of convenient things, you will never become a servant. If you will only wash at the feet of something that excites you or invigorates you, you will never wash feet for very long.

So we fill up our lives with amusement – little toys – and we have a church filled with dirty feet. The church has:

- a roomful of kids – we need someone to wash their feet,
- rooms filled with infants and toddlers – we need someone to wash their feet,
- a parking lot filled with people who come to worship and need to find a space – we need someone to wash their feet.

Ruth Harms Calkin wrote a poem entitled, *I Wonder*. It reads,

You know, Lord, how I serve You with great emotional fervor in the limelight.

You know how eagerly I speak for You at a women’s club.

You know how I effervesce when I promote a fellowship group.

You know my genuine enthusiasm at a Bible study.

But how would I react, I wonder, if You pointed to a basin of water, and asked me to wash the calloused feet of a bent and wrinkled old woman day after day, month after month in a room where nobody saw and nobody knew.

By the way, did you notice that John never tells us whether Jesus had His feet washed that night. Did somebody volunteer? Did Jesus refuse an attempt on their part? I believe that for those two thoughts to be true, Jesus would have become an inconsistent model. I would just bet that after this lesson was over, the disciples crowded around their beloved Master and Teacher and all took part demonstrating to Him their servanthood.

And years later, the message still stuck – because all but one of them would give their dying breath as servants for the One who, on that hot April night, became a servant to them.

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