

Footwashing ancient past or present practice?



"Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you." (Philemon 1:8,9)

Of all the teachings of our Lord Jesus this has to be, by far, the most neglected teaching in Christianity. What in the world is this? Should we do this? How do we do this? Is it a teaching or a sign?

"Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end. And supper being ended, the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's [son], to betray him; Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God, and went to God; He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself. After that he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe [them] with the towel wherewith he was girded. Then cometh he to Simon Peter: and Peter saith unto him, Lord, dost thou wash my feet? Jesus answered and said unto him, What I

do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter. Peter saith unto him, Thou shalt never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me. Simon Peter saith unto him, Lord, not my feet only, but also [my] hands and [my] head. Jesus saith to him, He that is washed needeth not save to wash [his] feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all. For he knew who should betray him; therefore said he, Ye are not all clean. So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for [so] I am. If I then, [your] Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them." (John 13:1-17)

The above text is the single most used text on this subject to prove or disprove it. **Let me remind you the reader that the text is there—it's in the scriptures.** Which means as Christians desiring to be true to God and His word we must deal with this passage. What is it about Christian people that makes them think they can disobey, or wish away passages of Scripture? It behooves us to deal with all the commands and passages of Scripture even if it's difficult to understand. I would say, and at the risk of many disagreeing, it's better to take the safe road and obey than to disobey. The first instance of the foot washing we find in the Bible is in Genesis 18:4.

"Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree."

This is such a beautiful setting. Abraham is greeting guests, and in so doing showing great hospitality. The words in this passage are simple literal water, washing, and feet.

As Christians we should know the Bible says.

"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!" (Isaiah 52:7)

"Behold upon the mountains the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace! O Judah, keep thy solemn feasts, perform thy vows: for the wicked shall no more pass through thee; he is utterly cut off." (Nehum 1:15)

"And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!" (Romans 10:15)

"My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment." (Luke 7:46)

"And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace." (Ephesians 6:15)

So the feet, symbolically according to the Scriptures, have the importance of carrying the gospel to the world. There are other aspects we need to look at.

Hospitality from a host

Genesis 19:2; 24:32; 43:24; Judges 19:21; 2 Samuel 11:8; Luke 7:38,44; 1 Timothy 5:10.

Humility

Exodus 3:5; 30:19,21; Joshua 10:24; Judges 19:21; 1 Samuel 25:41; Psalm 8:6; Song of Solomon 5:3; Luke 7:38,44; John 11:2; 12:3; 1 Timothy 5:10.

Servant hood

Exodus 24:10; 30:19,21; 1 Samuel 25:41; Psalm 8:6; Song of Solomon 5:3; Isaiah 52:7; Luke 7:38,44; John 11:2; 12:3; 1 Timothy 5:10.

God will watch our manner of life

1 Samuel 2:9; 2 Samuel 22:34; Psalm 18:33,36; 25:15; Habakkuk 3:19; Luke 1:79.

God's power

Psalm 18:19; 58:10; Isaiah 37:25; Hebrews 2:8.

As a witness against others

Matthew 10:14; Luke 9:5.

There are three things that are found in the act of foot washing.

Humility - (doing it without considering yourself)

Servitude - (show care for others)

Obedience - (Jesus said to do it)

Here is a quote to help explain the history.

"In New Testament times, foot washing was a common duty for low-ranking servants. When travelers would visit an affluent home, it was the custom for the host to have their guests feet washed. It was considered a degrading task for any servant, and would be especially humbling and disgusting for the cleanliness-minded Jew to remove the sandals and wash filthy, road-stenched feet. Jesus showed that the only way to follow Him, and the only path to spiritual greatness, is to humble ourselves before our brethren with the heart of a loving servant." (<http://www.victorious.org/chur55.htm>)

Let's look at the text one more time a little closer.

"Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end. And supper being ended, the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's [son], to betray him; Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God, and went to God; He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself. After that he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe [them] with the towel wherewith he was girded. Then cometh he to Simon Peter: and Peter saith unto him, Lord, dost thou wash my feet? Jesus answered and said unto him, What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter. Peter saith unto him, Thou shalt never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me. Simon Peter saith unto him, Lord, not my feet only, but also [my] hands and [my] head. Jesus saith to him, He that is

washed needeth not save to wash [his] feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all. For he knew who should betray him; therefore said he, Ye are not all clean. So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for [so] I am. If I then, [your] Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them." (John 13:1-17)

First, we notice that it was Passover. It was Jesus' last Passover before He is to secure salvation for His elect. Also notice the act of washing comes much later after they had eaten, **"...and supper being ended."** We understand that this was not the usual hospitality shown to guests upon entering a house, but after the supper or the meal. In Jesus' day people walked miles on hot dusty roads in sandals. A foot bath was an act of hospitality much like our custom of serving a guest coffee, tea, or a cold drink. Footwashing was commonly done in the home not the temple.

As an act of supreme humility He washes all of their feet, **"after that he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe [them] with the towel wherewith he was girded."** This is an example of Jesus standing up from the throne of heaven, coming down to earth, and washing our sins away wiping them with His righteousness.

At this point **"...cometh he to Simon Peter: and Peter saith unto him, Lord, dost thou wash my feet?"** This is the typical response to an act we can not understand and feel uncomfortable with. Are we saying this to the Lord Jesus today? Are we, because of those that would tell us it's not for today, refusing our Lord's command? How about you are you? Does Jesus not come to us to "wash" us? Yes, He does.

Jesus answers, **"what I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter."** The words "knowest and know" mean perceive or understand. Jesus is telling Peter that he (Peter) does not understand what Jesus is doing but he (Peter) will later. Do you understand? Or will it be later for you?

"Peter saith unto him, Thou shalt never wash my feet." Strong words to speak to our Lord. It's understandable the reaction he has. After all this is God in human flesh our savior bowing down to wash His creations' feet! This is the mindset of many today over this neglected command. Do not turn away from our Lord's command.

"Jesus answered him, If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me. Simon Peter saith unto him, Lord, not my feet only, but also [my] hands and [my] head. Jesus saith to him, He that is washed needeth not save to wash [his] feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all. For he knew who should betray him; therefore said he, Ye are not all clean." Jesus is saying that if Peter did not allow Him to wash his feet Peter would have no part or share with Jesus. Our Lord explains that those that are "clean" have been saved by Him and are already clean—saved.

"So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for [so] I am. If I then, [your] Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet." It's true Jesus washed the feet of the disciples and told them to wash one another's feet. Right? Did you just read that? Look, either we do it or we don't. What will you do? Jesus says, in effect to them, do you understand what I just did? Jesus classifies Himself as the supreme Master and Lord of all. In so doing showing the Highest Himself humbles Himself in this act to serve and save others. If we understand who did it and why we should not have a problem to, **"...also ought to wash one another's feet."**

The words "one another's" is in the genitive case which means description. It's in the plural meaning more than one. Does Jesus mean the disciples are to **only** wash one another's feet? That is, just them the eleven no one else? We will see.

"For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them."

The word "example" *hupodeigma* means an exhibit, imitation, or pattern. This is a compound word from *hupo* = under and *deigma* = to show. Literally, to

place under to show. This is no doubt an example for imitation, or more simply, something to do and practice. Jesus actually gives two commands here.

If I then, [your] Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet.

For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.

And He gives one exhortation.

If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.

Is this not clear? Do you not see this? Jesus says He has, **...washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet.** This is so clear Jesus says to do it! Who do you believe a pastor, minister, theologian, or God the Lord Jesus?

Jesus also says, **for I have given you an example.** This is truly an example, pattern, or something to be imitated. To clarify more so they, and we as well, don't misunderstand Jesus says, **that ye should do as I have done to you.**

Again, no doubt as to what He wants us to do.

Lastly, we are blessed, **...If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.** The word *do* also means perform. This is a very clear directive from our Lord Jesus. What are we afraid of? Now many will say your wrong we're not to do this, this is not for us, or this is not for today. They will use the excuse that this is not a command or ordinance. A command from Jesus does not have to be a sacrament in order to be obeyed. Neither does a sacrament have to be a command to be obeyed. We obey because we are commanded to not when it's convenient. How could one look at this text and honestly say we don't need to keep this command? The spirit of the Scriptures, our Lord himself, and the continuance of the apostles speaks volumes that this is to be practiced.

Common objections

"The foot-washing was an example, a pattern. Many groups throughout church history have practiced literal foot-washing as a church ordinance. However, present culture in many lands does not call for the need to wash dust from the feet of one's guests. Whereas the Lord's Supper was practiced by the early church, it apparently did not practice foot-washing as an ordinance in church

gatherings. This passage emphasizes inner humility, not a physical rite." (<http://www.gotquestions.org/foot-washing.html>, second paragraph)

"Among our congregations, some practice foot washing, while others have discontinued the practice or have never observed it." (<http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/about/cof/art.13.htm>)

"Among groups that do not observe feet washing as an ordinance or rite, the example of Jesus is usually held to be symbolic and didactic." (http://www.fact-index.com/f/fe/feet_washing.html)

"Jesus' act of washing the disciples' feet has been called "the sacrament that almost made it." It contains both the earthly element and the divine command which constitute a sacrament. Yet except for Catholics on Maundy Thursday and a few sects, not many Christians wash feet. Perhaps Jesus made his point about doing menial service all too clear." (<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1675>)

"Jesus is not instituting foot-washing as a ritual for the church to observe. Unlike baptism and communion, both of which were already Jewish rituals, foot-washing was never a Jewish ritual. Furthermore, Acts never narrates the early church observing such a ritual, while it does so many times with baptism and communion. Rather, to emulate Jesus' foot-washing is to embrace a lifestyle of serving love toward others." (<http://www.xenos.org/teachings/topical/upperroom/gary/urd13-1.htm>)

"Concerning the ordinance of foot washing, neither Christ nor the Apostles commanded that it should be done as a ritual in the assembly of believers. Washing feet should be a practical service rendered in the daily lives of the saints. The requirement by Jesus (not an "ordinance") for Christians to wash one another's feet is just as needful today, as a demonstration of true humility, as it was during His earthly ministry. But this must be considered within the context of the culture within which one lives." (<http://www.bethelministries.com/FOOTWASHING.htm>)

The Early Church

The rite of feet washing appears to have been practiced in the early centuries of Christianity, though the evidence is scant. For example, Tertullian (145-220) mentions the practice in his *De Corona*, but gives no details as to who

practiced it or how it was practiced. It was practiced by the church at Milan (ca. A.D. 380), is mentioned by the Council of Elvira (A.D. 300), and is even referenced by Augustine (ca. A.D. 400).

"St. Benedict's Rule (A.D. 529) for the Benedictine Order prescribed hospitality footwashing in addition to a communal footwashing for humility."

"For He who washed the feet of the disciples sanctified the entire body, and rendered it clean." (Irenaeus, A.D. 180)

"'If she has washed the feet of the saints'—that is, if she has performed without shame the lowest offices for the saints" (Clement of Alexandria, A.D. 195)

"What unbelieving husband will permit his wife to offer water for the saints' feet?" (Tertullian, A.D. 205)

Conclusion

Is foot washing for us today? Yes.

We are NOT saying foot washing is a sacrament, nor are we saying it is essential for salvation. It has nothing to do with salvation. It will be a practice observed BECAUSE we are saved by His grace. We can practice it when we can. It could be done while at the Lord's table after supper. Today, we have shoes and showers and soap. It makes no sense to remove shoes from already clean feet and let someone wash them, but our Lord says do it.

I don't know why we are to do it, but Jesus says too, so we do. How in today's world? When in the home of the brothers and sisters after the meal you be the one to stand up and say, "as an act of obedience to the Lord's command I will wash your feet." It does not have to be a nail scrubber just wash em! :)

Excellent Links

<http://www.kencollins.com/how-06.htm>

http://www.heraldmag.org/98ma_3.htm

<http://www.streetlevel.ca/bibleStudies/footwashing1.htm>

http://www.panthercreekchurch.org/foot_washing.htm

Amen?