

Becoming A Foot Washer

Franklin Church of Christ
Edwin Crozier
January 28, 2007
AM Assembly

Introduction:

What would you think if I started my sermon by pulling out a basin of water and a towel and began to wash your feet? How shocked would you be? Though your shock would be for different reasons, you begin to see what the apostles felt during the Passover when Jesus washed their feet. **John 13:1-20** is a powerful passage. Yet, it is often overlooked. When it is discussed, we typically spend more time trying to explain what it does not mean instead of learning what it does mean. Allow me briefly to tell you what it does not mean. It does not mean we have to actually wash each other's feet. This was a cultural tradition based on their societal needs and would have absolutely no meaning to us. Additionally, even within that tradition, it was never used as a means to worship God. There, that is what it does not mean. But what does it mean? This passage issues the greatest challenges of all the word of God. When we learn what this passage really does mean, we may find ourselves wishing that all it taught was that we need to have a foot washing service every once and a while. This passage breaks through the shallowness of so much modern Christianity. It strips away the fineries and luxuries with which we often want to decorate our Christianity and says, "Here is what being Christlike is all about." **John 13** says, "You may have been baptized, you may go to church regularly, you may put lots of money in the collection plate, but until you have done this, don't deceive yourself. You are lost." That is kind of frightening isn't it? This passage contains the essence of what it means to be Christian. The rest is icing on the cake. In this lesson we will learn the six challenges of **John 13:1-20**.

Discussion:

- I. The challenge to serve others.
 - A. In **Matthew 20:28**, Jesus claimed the "Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve." Of course, the ultimate example of His service is that He gave "His life a ransom for many." Yet, I think at times we have become so used to speaking of the crucifixion that the service represented by it has become blasé and unimpressive. Or perhaps, it is so grand that we stand in awe of it and cannot make application to our own lives. Jesus' example in **John 13** is a little more down to earth. And, because we speak very little of it, quite impressive.
 - B. Jesus completely turned the social order upside down. The Master performed the task of the slave for His own disciples. Though He knew God had given Him all things (**John 13:3**), He did not simply command the disciples to wash one another's feet. He served them Himself, leading by example. According to **Luke 22:27**, Jesus, who should have been reclining at the table, being served by His disciples, sat among His own disciples as their servant.
 - C. Imagine what was going through the disciples' minds as Jesus sat down and began teaching. "You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash ..." What did they expect to come next? Perhaps, "Do unto me as I have done unto you." "You also ought to wash My feet." But Jesus did not say that. He did not use this illustration to teach the apostles to serve Him. He said, "If I then, the Lord and Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (**John 13:14**). Can you see it now? The uproar in the mind's of the disciples. Imagine Matthew thinking, "Me, wash their feet? I work for the government. Most of these guys are just fisherman. I don't have to put up with this humiliation."
 - D. Look at those around you. Jesus is challenging you to serve them. Could you gird yourself with the towel and wash their feet? I know, I know, this passage does not mean we must literally wash someone else's feet. But perhaps the mere fact that we bristle at the thought of washing feet demonstrates we have yet to rise up to this challenge. If washing feet is too archaic, perhaps you could take some time this week to go to their house and clean their toilets. What was that? "How dare you expect me to get on my hands and knees and scrub anyone's toilet!" If Jesus, the Lord and Teacher, performed the lowest of all acts of service for His servants, then we also ought to serve one another. Are you challenged yet?
- II. The challenge to humble yourself in the sight of your brethren.
 - A. How easy it is to look at ourselves through rose-colored glasses. Or perhaps how easy it is just to look at ourselves. There are two kinds of navel gazing. The kind wherein we constantly look

at ourselves as something special. (The subject of the Carly Simon song, "You're so vain" fits here.) The other is the one who would never think he is vain and arrogant, because his thoughts are so negative about himself. The problem is, most of his thoughts are about himself. Both people are caught up in forms of arrogance. Because both, whether they admit it or not, think the world revolves around and is focused on them. We are not to live this way.

- B. Rather, we are to humble ourselves. If Jesus were simply saying what James said in **James 4:10**, "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord," there would be no challenge. After all, how can we help but be humble in the sight of the almighty God. But He didn't say that. The challenge of **John 13** is to humble yourself in the sight of your brethren, your equals. As **I Peter 5:5** says, "Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another." Jesus is our example, who, though equal with the Father, did not struggle to hang on and demand to be treated as equal but rather came to this earth as a servant. He was a servant not only to His equal but to many who were lesser than He and humbled Himself even to the point of death (**Philippians 2:5-8**).
- C. The challenge is that in our own minds we are the important ones. Our strengths are the greatest. Our accomplishments the biggest. Our minds the wisest. Our position the most important. Our problems the hardest. Our concerns the most worrisome. Our fears the most valid. But humility, as expressed in **Philippians 2:3-4**, means sincerely viewing the person next to you as more important. Perhaps we do not see this problem in our world greater in any place than in the home. We know that men and women are equals, especially in Christ (**Galatians 3:28**). Yet, in general, wives do not want to submit to husbands. And husbands often refuse to sacrifice themselves for their wives. If we will not even humble ourselves before the one to whom we committed ourselves for life, will we do so for those who are simply brethren? Are you challenged yet?

III. The challenge to prefer one another in honor.

- A. In all honesty, this challenge is perhaps one of the greatest for me. Maybe you know the struggle of wanting to receive honor. Perhaps you know what it is like to cringe with jealousy when someone else is complimented. Naturally, we thrive on honor. We seek it and want it. Men often perform great deeds, not because of concern, compassion or care but because they will be honored by men. These are the hypocrites about whom Jesus spoke in **Matthew 6:1-5** who performed their good deeds and acts of righteousness so they might be seen of men.
- B. Jesus, God in the flesh, the one who was most deserving of honor (**Revelation 5:12**), gave up that glory and came in the form of man, becoming a bond-servant, not just for God but for you and me, the least deserving of honor (**Philippians 2:7**). And on this night, nearly 2000 years ago, He went even beyond that and treated these twelve ignorant, rash, arrogant, sometimes rebellious, sinful men as masters. He honored them by washing their feet.
- C. **Romans 12:10** instructs us to prefer one another in honor. Don't seek others to honor you. Don't brag about your work. Don't wait to work until others can see you. Do your work quietly and make lots of noise about the work everyone else is doing. But some are not worthy of honor are they? Can you imagine Peter, James and John, the inner circle, looking at the others and thinking, "They are not as close to the Master as we are. They do not deserve as much honor as we do." Or perhaps Simon the Zealot thinking, "I don't mind honoring Peter, but Matthew is a tax-collector, a Roman sympathizer. He is not worthy of honor." Paul addressed this in **I Corinthians 12:23**. We are to bestow the most honor on those who seem to deserve it least. They are the ones that need the encouragement. We must catch them doing things right and praise and honor them for it. The one you simply can't imagine honoring, find something about him or her and sincerely honor them for it. Are you challenged yet?

IV. The challenge to lean not on your own understanding.

- A. At first, you may think this statement doesn't belong. But the essence of Christianity and the challenges presented here are not all about our relationships with one another. In the midst of this story another lesson is brought forth, demonstrated by Peter. Poor guy, he just can't seem to win for losing. Who knows how many feet Jesus had washed before coming to Peter. Perhaps he was the first. Or perhaps he had sat silently in disbelief that the others would let Jesus be their slave. But he would not, he would refuse. And who among us would not have

done the same? Returning to the illustration I used above, who among us would allow Jesus to visit our home and clean our toilets? We are certain, God does not do toilets. In like manner, He will not wash Peter's feet. At least not when we are thinking from our own understanding.

- B. **Proverbs 3:5** says we must trust in God always and never lean on our own understanding. Peter, however, was leaning on his own understanding. Despite all the teaching Jesus had done on serving, Peter still did not understand fully what Jesus was all about and who He was. He was (and is) the God who serves. He is the God who created a universe perfectly suited to our needs. He is the God who maintains the balance of this universe so we may survive. He is the God who causes the sun to rise upon us and the rain to fall on our crops. He is the God who provides us with food, clothing, shelter and every good thing to enjoy. He is the God who was coming to the earth to perform the ultimate service for us. Jesus was and is at His very heart a servant. And Peter didn't get it.
- C. Notice how this plays out in **John 13:6-9**. Peter is flabbergasted, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" Jesus replied, "You don't understand now, but you will." As if instructing a child saying, "It is alright Peter, I know you don't understand, but trust Me, I know what I am doing and you will understand in time." Instead of heeding Jesus' words, he persisted in following down the path of his own lack of understanding. "Never shall you wash my feet!" What seemingly noble words that amount to nothing more in this context than saying, "You may claim I don't understand, but I understand this, I am going to serve you my way and my understanding says you will not wash my feet!" Jesus responded, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." In other words, "I am giving you another chance here Peter. You do not understand, but understand this, if you try to force things to be your way, you will have no part in Me." At this, Peter realized his mistake and recanted. Or did he? No, he didn't. Rather, in a knee-jerk reaction he continued to act as though he knew better than Jesus. Surely, if washing feet made him partner with Jesus then washing feet wasn't enough. "You aren't going far enough Lord, do my head and my hands too." Again, on the surface seemingly noble words that suggest Peter's great desire to be in partnership with Jesus. But, once again, in the context they amount to nothing more than, "Master, do things the way I understand. Don't make me have faith that your way is right." Despite the fact that we all would have probably acted the same way, Peter still demonstrated self-will. He did not understand what Jesus was doing. But he should have trusted Jesus. And he should have let things be done Jesus' way without trying to change them or improve them.
- D. Do we not see this in modern religion today as man so often leans on his own understanding? He believes his service for God is so great because of his own sincerity. But Peter was sincere in his refusal and then in his begging. But he was still wrong. We cannot improve on God's plan in any way. We may not understand why God has done something or required something of us. However, we are challenged not to lean on our own understanding, but rather to trust God always. Are you challenged yet?

V. The challenge to quit competing.

- A. Can you imagine how small the disciples felt? These men who had just been arguing among themselves about who was the greatest (**Luke 22:24**) sat there and watched the slow process of Jesus, their Master, washing their dirty and disgusting feet. Can you imagine each one as he watched Jesus drawing closer, then cleaning their feet and then wiping them dry? Do you think they were remembering the arrogant and possibly hateful things they had said as they argued about how great they were just moments before.
- B. The apostles were in competition. The goal was not to be the best servant of God they could be. Rather, it was to be a better servant than the one sitting next to them. Don't we all have that little part of us that wants to be better than everyone else? When we stand before God in judgment, we do not want to hear just, "Well done good and faithful servant" (**Matthew 25:21**). We hope to hear, "Well done My best and most faithful servant." We want others to see that we add more to the church. We are smarter. We are the better teachers. Our ideas are the best.
- C. What amazes me the most is the example of Jesus in this text. As the disciples competed with one another for the prize of greatness, I half expect Jesus to stand at the head of the table and say, "Don't you guys get it? You are all equals in the scheme of things. I am the one who is God in the flesh. I am the one who is being given all authority. I am the one who is going to be

sacrificed so your sins can be forgiven. I am the one who is greatest and the sooner you recognize that the better off you will be.” But He didn’t. He got down on His knees, kneeling before these mere men, these petty men and washed their feet. And He said, “I am the Lord and Teacher. But I am not here to brag about the great part I play in the scheme of things. I am here to serve. When you understand that and follow my example, you will be better off.”

- D. Like the apostles, we are not competitors. We are on the same team. We do not all run the same leg of the race or perform the same function (**Romans 12:4**), but we must not feel that greatness or being the greatest is our goal. Rather, using what God has given us as best we can is the goal (**Matthew 25:14-30**). Are you challenged yet?

VI. The challenge to love unconditionally.

- A. Despite their claims of allegiance, not one of these men were going to stand by the one they called Lord and Teacher later that evening. In fact, despite all the preparation and teaching, not one of these men would believe it when they were first told of the resurrection (**Mark 16:14**). Jesus knew all of that. And loved them up to the end anyway.
- B. The challenge in this is not to love somebody. Anyone can love somebody. The Gentiles and tax-gatherers loved somebody (**Matthew 5:46-47**). The challenge is we are to love everybody unconditionally. It doesn’t matter who the person is, we are to love them. It doesn’t matter what they have done or can do to us or for us, we are to love them. This love is not a feeling that we simply talk about. It is an action that we demonstrate. And we do it for all, whether rich or poor, black or white, fat or thin, ugly or pretty, mean or nice, etc.
- C. Jesus not only demonstrated this love for the apostles who would flee Him in general. He even specifically washed the feet of Peter. This apostle, in spite of being warned, would deny Jesus verbally and voluntarily three times in that very night. And, most amazing of all, he washed the feet of Judas, who was going to leave in just a moment, despite this great act of service and love in order to sell Jesus out to His enemies. He was going to prepare the way for Jesus’ death. The very heel that was about to be lifted up against Him (**John 13:18**), Jesus washed, just as He did the others.
- D. Unconditional love means even knowing that you will not return my love but I will bestow love on you anyway. It means looking at the one who hit me and turning the other cheek. It means submitting to the one who has been oppressive and pressed me into service and going the extra mile. It means protecting the one who has hurt me. It means caring for the one who has abused me. For Jesus, unconditional love went further than just washing the feet of the one who would betray Him. It went so far as asking the Father, “Forgive them, they know not what they do” (**Luke 23:34**) for the very people who shouted, “Crucify Him!” ... for the men who tied up the crown of thorns and pushed it onto His head. ... for the men who drove the nails through His hands. ... for those who stood watching and mocking, “Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us” (**Luke 23:39**)! He prayed that as He was being sacrificed to provide that very forgiveness. There is unconditional love.

Conclusion:

Are you challenged yet? Don’t you wish after studying this chapter that it simply said we had to have a foot washing service every once in a while? That would be easy. Challenges are kind of uncomfortable. But let us not leave on a strictly challenging note. Do not miss **John 13:17**, Jesus said, “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.” **John 13** challenges us. What it expects and requires of us will take commitment, dedication and work. But, rising up to these challenges provides blessing. We are blessed when we do these things. That is, in these things we will find happiness, contentment and peace. So often we run from these challenges because we think having to serve others or humble ourselves will destroy our self-esteem and our happiness. But do not lean on our culture’s thinking about these things. God knows what will provide us the blessing. Lean on God and face these challenges, ever praying that His good hand be with you.