

“If I Do Not Wash You, You Have No Share With Me”

Scripture Readings: Exodus 30:17-21; Psalm 51:2, 7; JOHN 13:1-20, 31-35

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Dear congregation of Christ: Every Maundy Thursday, the day before Good Friday, some evangelical churches include a footwashing ceremony in their Holy Communion service. Benedictine monks used to practice footwashing as a part of welcoming guests. In the Greek Orthodox tradition in Jerusalem, the archbishop washes and kisses the feet of 12 of his priests. In England, Catholic kings used to wash the feet of 12 poor men. Most recently, last Maundy Thursday, Pope Francis went to a refugee center just outside of Rome to wash and kiss the feet of Muslim, Orthodox, Hindu and Catholic refugees.

Did Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed, really command us to perform an annual footwashing ceremony? Or as John Calvin wrote, is this footwashing ceremony done by churches an “idle and unmeaning,” “a display of buffoonery,” and “a shameful mockery of Christ”? Why did Calvin believe so?

Most Christians are familiar with this event on the night before Jesus was arrested and crucified. On this night before the Passover, Jesus “*knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father.*” So after eating the Passover meal with his twelve disciples, he took off his outer garments, tied a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin, and proceeded to wash his disciples’ feet. When he came to Peter, he asked Jesus, “*Lord, do you wash my feet?*” Then Peter objected to the washing, saying, “*You shall never wash my feet.*” But Jesus answered him, “*If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.*”

So this is our theme today, “**If I Do Not Wash You, You Have No Share With Me,**” under two headings: first, “**You are Clean**”; and second, “**Love One Another.**”

“You Are Clean”

In the ancient Near East, a person welcomes a guest or a traveler by offering water to wash his feet, a cup of water to drink, and food to eat. This is to show hospitality and respect to the visitor. Abraham welcomed three strangers in his tent with this kind of hospitality (Gen 18:4; see also Gen 19:2; 24:32; 43:24; Jgs 19:21; 1 Sam 25:41; 2 Sam 11:8; Psa 58:10). In the New Testament, we also find washing of a visitor’s feet as a form of hospitality. Jesus rebuked Simon the Pharisee for not offering to wash his feet when he visited him, while a woman washed his feet with her tears (Luke 7:44). Paul says that widows who deserve the help of the church are to show hospitality by washing the feet of her brothers and sisters in Christ (1 Tim 5:10).

Often, washing visitors’ feet is the humble task of slaves. In 1 Samuel 25, we read about a man named Nabal who insulted King David by not providing food for his hungry men. So David set out to kill Nabal, but Nabal’s wife Abigail interceded for her husband, giving them food and drink. After Nabal died, David asked Abigail to be his wife, and she bowed with her face to the ground, saying, “*Behold, your handmaid is a servant to wash the feet of the servants of my lord*” (1 Sam 25:41). So washing someone’s feet is the menial and humble job of servants and

slaves. This is why Peter objected to Jesus washing his feet. He considers Jesus as his Master and Teacher, not a slave who would wash his feet.

When Peter questioned Jesus about washing his feet, Jesus told him, *“What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.”* This is one of many instances where John points out that the disciples did not understand Jesus’ words and actions until after his resurrection. In John 2:19-22, Jesus told the Jews that if the temple is destroyed, he would raise it up in three days. Unbelievable! But after his resurrection, his disciples remembered his words and believed what the Scripture said about him. At his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, his disciples did not understand what just happened, but they finally understood what was written about him and what had been done to him only after his resurrection (John 12:16).

Then Peter vehemently argued, *“You shall never wash my feet.”* To which Jesus replied, *“If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.”* Was Jesus speaking literally? Remember that he washed the feet of all the Twelve, including Judas Iscariot’s. Did Judas have “a share” with Jesus, since he was *“the son of destruction”* before the creation of the world? (John 17:12) He was also possessed by Satan (verses 2, 27). So Judas did not have a share with Jesus.

In the New Testament, to “share with Jesus” means to be united to him, to have a part in the salvation that Jesus gives. The same word is used in Revelation 22:19, where John says that a believer has a *“share in the tree of life and in the holy city.”* And a person is *“blessed and holy”* because he *“shares in the first resurrection,”* when he believed and received eternal life (Rev 20:6). All Christians share in Christ’s life, death and resurrection: a life in obedience to God; death to sins and temptations; and a new life of holiness now and the resurrection of the body.

So when Jesus told Peter that he had to wash him to have a share with him, he was telling him that he had to be washed of his sins and its uncleanness and filthiness. The filthiness of his feet from daily walking wearing sandals represents the sins he commits daily against God. Washing his feet then means that he had been forgiven of these sins by Jesus in his death.

Often in Scripture, washing with water means cleansing by the Holy Spirit. In Genesis 35:1-3, Jacob instructs his whole household before they worship God at an altar in Bethel, *“Put away the foreign gods that are among you and purify yourselves and change your garments.”* In Exodus 19:10, God commands Moses before Israel gathers to worship him at Mount Sinai, *“consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments.”* In Psalm 51, David pleads to God for forgiveness, *“Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!” Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow”* (Psa 51:2, 7). In Ezekiel 36:25-27, God promises in the new covenant, *“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness... And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”*

In the New Testament, we find the same references to the work of the Holy Spirit in washing with water in the forgiveness of sins. Jesus told Nicodemus, *“unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God”* (John 3:5). In Titus 3:5, Paul says that Christ *“saved us... by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.”* Paul assures the church in Corinth, *“But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God”* (1 Cor 6:11).

And Peter tells us how cleansing of the body by water is a type of baptism, a sign of the washing away of sins, *“Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ”* (1 Pet 3:21). This is why our Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 26 refers to baptism “as the outward washing with water” joined with the promise “that I am washed with His blood and Spirit from the pollution of my soul, that is, from all my sins” (HC 69). To be washed with the blood and Spirit of Christ is “to have the forgiveness of sins from God through grace... and also to be renewed by the Holy Spirit” (HC 70). And water baptism is a “divine pledge and token He may assure us that we are as really washed from our sins spiritually as our bodies are washed with water” (HC 73).

As Jesus said, Peter only understood washing with water literally. So he said to Jesus, *“Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”* It was an honor that Jesus washed his feet, and it would be a greater honor if Jesus washed his whole body. Again, Jesus had to correct Peter, *“The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you.”* Peter and the other believing disciples, except for Judas, were already forgiven of their sins and righteous before God. By believing in Jesus as their Savior, his perfect righteousness was accounted to them. They did not have to be washed of their sins again and again in the sense of being declared righteous and *“completely clean”* before God. This is what being justified before God means – a one-time declaration of righteousness.

However, all believers remain sinners and fall into sin because of the remnants of the sinful nature. We still need to confess and repent of our sins daily. We are pilgrims and sojourners whose feet get soiled before we reach our homes. Our feet need to be washed daily.

The bronze basin in the tabernacle and temple foreshadowed this washing. God commanded Aaron and his sons and all the succeeding priests to *“wash their hands and their feet.”* How often did they have to wash? At least twice a day, for the morning and evening sacrifice. Or if a person wanted to offer a sacrifice or a prayer, they had to first wash before they entered the sanctuary. What happens if they did not wash? They will die, because the sanctuary is God's dwelling-place, and if an unforgiven priest enters in, God's holiness will consume him.

For us today, it means that whenever we read or hear the law preached to us, we are to repent of our sins. Then, through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Christ, God forgives us of our sins. Unlike the Old Testament priests who entered the sanctuary again and again to make sacrifices for sin, Christ entered the Most Holy Place to make his sacrifice once for all. By this once for all sacrifice, all your sins are forgiven. You are already cleansed, declared righteous. But since the sinful nature is still in you, you need to hear the good news of forgiveness again and again to renew your hearts. You need to have your “feet washed” by the blood of Christ and the water of the Spirit daily. This is why Jesus says to his disciples that they are already “completely clean,” except for their feet.

Jesus made another exception to his disciples' cleanness: one of them is not clean. He knew that Judas, who was with the Twelve for all three years of his earthly ministry, did not really have a “share” with him, and he would betray him. Though Jesus also washed his feet, he did not have a share with him. He did not listen to Jesus' new commandment to “love one another.”

“Love One Another”

Jesus told his disciples that the outcome of having been cleansed by the Spirit and having a “share” with him is loving one another. Since he loved them to the end, they are to love one another. And this love for one another is demonstrated within the household of God in serving one another. Washing the disciples feet is his demonstration of servanthood, *“For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.”* Jesus was not telling them to literally wash each other's feet, but his action was an example of his servant love toward them.

His action was of pure humility, because only servants and slaves wash the feet of visitors. But the ultimate humility and servanthood he demonstrated was his departure from his glorious existence in heaven to come down to earth to be the servant of God and of his people, *“[he] emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men... he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross”* (Phil 2:6-8). He was the Suffering Servant all his earthly life and in his cruel death.

More than once, his disciples bickered over who is the greatest among them, jockeying for the best seats around the dining table. They even asked to be seated on the right and left hand of Jesus in heaven. So Jesus taught them a lesson in humility, that even though *“a servant is not greater than his master,”* he, the Master, was willing to be a servant to his disciples.

Dear friends, have you been cleansed of your sins by Jesus Christ, the only Savior and Lord who forgives your sins? If you believe in him alone as your Savior, you will be cleansed of your sins. He will declare you as completely clean – justified – before God in heaven.

And if you are one of those who have believed in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, do you demonstrate your love for your brothers and sisters in the household of God? Jesus was not talking about loving the world, although this is also his command to the church. But here, Jesus was talking about loving the household of God firstly, just as Paul commands, *“So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith”* (Gal 6:10).

Do you comfort one another in times of grief or tragedy? Do you visit the sick and the elderly? Do you help those who have broken pipes, plumbing, pumps, or appliances? Do you help them fix a flat? Do you support needy brothers and sisters with your material gifts? Do you drive the sick to the hospital or to the doctor? Do you write notes or letters of encouragement to those who are discouraged?

These are only a few of the countless ways in which you can be a humble servant to one another. Paul calls us, *“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others”* (Phil 2:3-4). And when you do, your unbelieving family and friends will notice, *“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”* You will then obey Jesus' command to be salt and light to the world.