

# Feet Washing— An Ordinance of God's House

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*John 13:1-17, "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 hand, 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 basin, 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 unto 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 unto you? Ye call me Master and Lord: and 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 unto 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. It you know these things, happy are ye if ye do them."*

When I mention feet washing, I am aware of the hostile attitude of the religious world toward this ordinance that Christ would have His church observe. He knew there would be much confusion

and even mentioned that there would be many false prophets and false teachers in the land. So, we want to study feet washing in the light of God's Eternal Word. Jesus said very plainly, "If I, your lord and master, have washed your feet, ye ought also to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done unto you. . . . If ye know these things, happy are ye if you do them."

Now, many people take this too lightly. I have heard expressions by ministers and laymen alike, to the effect that, "Well, I know that Jesus said we ought to do it, but I don't think there is anything compulsory about it."

We must remember that the New Testament is called the perfect law of liberty. The New Testament, my friend, does not say, "Thou shalt" or "Thou shalt not." It is the law of love; the perfect law of liberty is a law of love, and for that reason Christ's commandments are not of the "thou-shalt" variety. That was the construction of the old Law, but the law of Christ cannot be bound on the carnal mind. The old law was bound on

carnal minds, for there was no power in the blood of bulls and goats to change the man. Because the old animal sacrifices could not change the heart of man, the Word of God tells us that those ordinances were imposed on them. Hebrews 9:10b-11a speaks of "carnal ordinances imposed on them until the time of reformation. But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle." All through the old Law were given such injunctions as "thou shalt not kill; thou shalt love the Lord thy God", but in the law of Christ, the New Testament, we find something altogether different, something that cannot be bound on the carnal mind. So, you will find no "thou shalt's," but, "if you love me, you will . . ." (John 14:23).

There is no high pressure in Jesus' commands. Friend, there would be no good derived from keeping what Jesus asked us to do, if we did it only under pressure. The blessing is received when we obey through love and appreciation. The New Testament very freely uses the expression "ought." Allow me to give

you a few examples. In Luke 18:1 Jesus' lesson was, "Men ought always to pray and not to faint." If Christians took this verse as lightly as they do John 13:14, they would soon faint along the way, for when we fail to do what we know we ought, we reap something extremely unpleasant. He will never force you to pray, but if you fail to do it, the result will be disastrous.

In Ephesians 5:28 Paul wrote, "So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies." First John 4:11 reads, "We ought also to love one another." I could multiply New Testament texts that use this little word. It is a small but very profound word, covering many requirements for successful Christian living. Christ purposely chose this expression when He said, "If I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet."

We learn from John 13 that Jesus and the Twelve were preparing for the feast of the Passover. The King James Version reads, "Supper being ended," but a better translation reads, "Supper being prepared or ready." They sat down

at the table and began the ancient Passover supper, and while they sat there, Jesus rose from the table, girded Himself with a towel, took a basin of water, and began to wash His disciples feet. They sat there amazed and upset, wondering what was happening. In Luke 22:15 Jesus said, "With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer." He desired to eat this particular Passover with them with such longing because it was to be the last one.

Here at this last supper was the fulfilling of the old and the introduction of the ordinances of the New Testament. This was the last Passover that ever was to be recognized by God. This is the one to which He had looked forward for hundreds of years. This was the one where the old type would become reality and something new set forth. So He said, "With great desire I have desired to keep this passover with you." This is the sequence of events that night: the Passover was abolished, feet washing was instituted, and the first Lord's Supper was observed. He fulfilled the old, and then brought forth the new.

One of the oldest theories concerning Jesus' act of washing the disciples' feet is that it was just a Jewish custom and has nothing to do with Christians today. Now, I own that there was a custom of washing dirty feet. This ordinance, however, is for people who are physically clean, for Jesus said, "Ye are clean. . . ." The Jewish custom called for each to wash his own feet. If one was rich, his servants washed his feet. Now, according to tradition, during certain seasons of the year, men wore sandals and loose garments and walked through the dust. It was a custom that before entering someone's home, a man washed his own feet in a pan of water provided for that purpose; if one entered a wealthy man's home, a servant washed his feet before he entered.

Here we have not men washing their own feet, neither a servant washing men's feet, but a Master washing his servants' feet. If it was a custom, why did Peter, who was raised a staunch Jew, ask, "Oh, what are you doing?" Why did Jesus say, "What I am doing now, you do not know"? If it was a custom, why

did Jesus tell this Jew, "You do not know what I am doing now, but you will know hereafter"? My friend, I will give you the answer: It was not a Jewish custom. I already have mentioned that in those days men wore loose garments and sandals. Not only did they wash their feet, but many times they went to a pool or public bathhouse and took a bath after they had walked from one city to another, before they went into someone's house. That is apparently what happened in this instance.

Peter said, "You are not going to wash my feet." Jesus said, "If I do not wash you, you will have no part in Me." "Well," Peter answered, "if you are going to put it that way, wash my hands and my head, too!" Jesus replied, "I am not washing you because you are dirty, for you are already clean." So, this had nothing to do with cleanliness of the body. They already had been to the bath, and their bodies were washed.

All three ordinances of God's house—water baptism, feet washing, and the Lord's Supper—have been instituted from elements of common practice, but

when Christ spoke the word, they became more than merely common practices. They became ordinances of God's house. Baptism was just like going to the pool and washing off the dust that their loose garments permitted to cling to their bodies, but who would liken baptism to taking a bath? Nobody but a fool would. The same kind of individual would liken feet washing to washing feet. It was a common thing in Jesus' day, and still is, for people who are hungry to eat supper and on the table to serve bread and drink; but, when Christ put them in His hand and said, "This is my body and blood; this do in remembrance of me," then it took on a religious connotation. Every ordinance came from common practice, but when Christ separated them from the mundane, they were highly elevated to a spiritual plane.

Now, Christ took the water and the towel and washed His disciples' feet; then He said to them, "If I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's." It became a religious rite. Their feet already had been washed before they came to the

table because custom required them to be clean already, and Jesus said in verse 10, "He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit." They had already washed. Jesus' action had nothing to do with washing off sand from their feet. It was the institution of a new ordinance. Jesus did not wash any strangers' feet, but only His disciples'. Neither did He ever before wash their feet, for Peter did not know what He was doing This was something outstanding that they had never seen. Jesus washed their feet.

Everything, of course, is to be done decently and in order, nothing unseemly. We hold feet washing services even as Jesus did, the brethren by themselves and the sisters by themselves When we do it just as Jesus said, with the same Spirit, with the same attitude as the Master, we get the blessing just as the Word promises.

Now, the custom of washing feet when they are dirty is practiced by Christians, Mohammedans, infidels, devil-possessed individuals, heathens, and sinners; but, feet washing is only to

be observed by the saints. Commentators say the disciples wore sandals on that Passover night, but they could not have done so. A book of customs tells that during the cold months they did not wear loose clothing and sandals. I know it was cold, for just a little later in the same night, it was so chilly that Peter warmed himself by the fire. So, I am made to wonder if they even wore sandals that night.

You can get almost everyone to admit that feet washing is in the Bible, and some will even admit that they think we ought to practice it. But Jesus made it a test of fellowship, in one sense. In verse 8, when Peter said, "You are not going to wash me," Jesus said, "If I wash them not, thou hast no part in me." Jesus Christ instituted, practiced, and commanded feet washing, hence, it is constituted an ordinance of the church, and no man dare take it out.

Someone may ask, "Did the early church sanction this observance?" Others may say, "Well, John was the only Scripture writer who mentioned it, and then only once." It is mentioned more

than once, but if it were not, I ask, how many times must something be commanded before it is binding on the Christian? "You must be born again," is commanded only once. My friend, something does not have to be commanded six or twelve times for it to be true. Feet washing is mentioned more than once, though. Did the early church practice it? Where did they get their command? The command to practice it is found in Matthew 28:19-20.

After He arose from the dead, Jesus met the twelve in a mountain in Galilee, and said, "All power is given unto me both in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world." There is the link that brings the command in John 13:14 to you and me. First Timothy 5:10 deals with caring for the poor widows of the church. Paul listed the requirements they must meet for the church to keep them, and one of

the conditions is, "If she have washed the saints' feet." Paul made it very plain that a widow was not worthy of support by the church unless she had washed the saints' feet. That is the standard the early church held regarding this ordinance.

I repeat, even though the Word of God is plain and clearly commands feet washing, it still rests entirely on love. He said, "If you love me, you will keep my Word." The love of God shed abroad in our hearts prompts us to wash feet. Paul spoke profoundly when he said that the love of Christ constrains us. Brother, when the love of Christ is constraining us, we will do just what Jesus said: keep His commandments.

Since this ordinance rests entirely on love, we must have a feet washing spirit to wash feet and ever be happy over it. Why, I have known people who were afraid they would lose their salvation if they did not wash feet, so they came with the attitude, "I guess I'll have to do it, if that's what the Book says. Hurry up; jerk your shoes off and let me give you a quick rub and get it over with."

They did not get a thing from doing it, and they would have felt better if they had stayed home. Brother, we must have the Spirit of Christ until we love one another even as He loves us. The observance of this ordinance is contingent on love, and we must have that love prompting us; we must have a feet washing spirit to wash feet and be happy about it.

Jesus did not ask His disciples to wash His feet, and He did not ask them to wash each other's feet then. He said, "You will know hereafter, but you do not know a thing about it now." They still had bickering and strife among them. We read in the Scriptures that one wanted to sit on the left hand, and one on the right, and they even argued about which one was the greatest in the kingdom. Men like that could not wash feet, so Jesus did not require it. Instead, He said, "You don't know what I'm doing now, but you will know hereafter."

The Holy Ghost fell on them on the Day of Pentecost, and then they understood how Christ felt, and they cast aside that strife and division and all

those things, and became one body in Jesus Christ. Even as Christ alone could wash feet, it is still only for the body of Christ, the church, men who have a like Spirit as He had. When we get the mind of Christ, then we know what Christ did that night, why He did it, and what prompted Him to do it. So, we must have a feet washing spirit to observe this sacred ordinance.

The disciples' attitudes before Calvary and Pentecost show that they did not have a feet washing spirit. Luke 7:36-44 states: "And one of the Pharisees desired him that he would eat with him. And he went into the Pharisee's house and sat down to meat. And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment, and stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and annointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee which had bidden him saw it, he spake within himself, saying, This man, if he

were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner. And Jesus answering said unto him, Simon, I have somewhat to say unto thee. And he saith, Master, say on. There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed him five hundred pence, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which one of them will love him most? Simon answered and said, I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most. And he said unto him, thou hast rightly judged. He turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head."

One of the other evangelists writes that when the alabaster box was broken, the disciples said, "Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence and given to the poor?" Do you see their attitude? Appreciation must prompt the keeping of this ordinance. If you do not

appreciate your brother, it does no good to wash his feet, but if you do appreciate him, Jesus has given you a way to show it. In John 13, Jesus told who would betray Him, the one to whom He gave the sop that He dipped, He gave it to Judas Iscariot and told him, "That thou doest, do quickly." And Judas went out.

After Judas went out, Jesus said in verse 34, "A new commandment I give unto you. That ye love one another, as I have loved you, that ye also love one another." Now, friend, if this new commandment is not feet washing, then there was no new commandment given, for the commandment to love one another was from the very beginning. The commandment was, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength . . . and the second is like, namely, this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Mark 12:30-31).

Never before John 13 had Jesus given a commandment for brethren, disciples, and true followers to show their love one to another in a specific way. "A new commandment I give unto

you, that you love one another even as I have loved you."

Christ had not gone to the Cross yet, so how had He loved them? Brother, He loved them to the extent that He humbled Himself before them and washed their feet. He even washed Judas' feet, who was to betray and sell Him within a very few hours. He said, "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you." I repeat, love was no new commandment, but this way of showing love between disciples was new. It is said that there are other ways that would be just as well. Someone asked, "Why couldn't we take a basket of groceries to the poor? Or visit a sick man?" Jesus knew men would think that, so He climaxed the lesson by saying, "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 you should do as I have done to you."

Now, there should be no confusion over these verses. We do not read that He took them a basket of groceries. Instead, He took a pan of water and a

towel, and He washed their feet. He is our example in all things, even feet washing. Someone said, "I'll never do it." Well, it is not for the worldly; it is not for unbelievers. He said, "If I, your Lord and Master have washed your feet, ye ought also to wash one another's feet." There is much in that statement. He tells us that in the last days there would be many people coming who would say, "Lord, Lord." There is a vast difference in saying "Lord, Lord," and letting Him be Lord. In effect Jesus said, "If I am your Lord and Master, and I have washed your feet, you have an example. If you truly want to be My servants, you ought to wash one another's feet."

Feet washing was given as a way for disciples, for brethren and sisters in the great family of God, to show appreciation and love one for another. Someone asks, "Can't we do it by visiting them; can't we do it by telling them we appreciate them?" Sinners do that, but you will find very few sinners who want to wash feet, because it is too humble a way. It is for people who have humbled

themselves already before Christ. He gave us a way, my friend, to show our love and appreciation one to another: feet washing.

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