

WASHING THE DISCIPLES' FEET

Rev. Morley D. Rich

Lessons: John 13:1-17; Arcana Coelestia 3147

There is one thing in this lesson that we read that should puzzle us. We know that the Lord has all power, that He can do anything. We know also that He sees all things, and that He is present everywhere. He is the Maker of the world and the Savior of all men. Yet the wonder is that He should stoop to such a humble and lowly task as that of washing His disciples' feet. Peter, too, felt that his great Teacher should not stoop to wash his feet, for he said, "Lord, dost Thou wash my feet?" Washing the feet of another, in those days, was done only by the most humble servants. Yet the Lord did it for His own disciples, who were poor and simple men.

How could this be? Is not the Lord the King of heaven and the Ruler of the universe? Why, then, should He kneel down, wash His disciples' feet in a basin, and afterwards wipe them with the towel that was around Him?

The Lord Himself gave two reasons why He did it. When Peter in astonishment asked Him, "Dost thou wash my feet?" the Lord answered, "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with Me." And after He had finished washing the disciples' feet, the Lord gave the second reason, 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 ye should do as I have done unto you."

Let us think of the second reason first. We see that the Lord did this deed in order to set an example for his disciples, and also for all of us. And what lesson does that example bring us? It is a lesson in humbleness toward our neighbors and toward the Lord. The Lord did it in order to show that if He could do such a thing for others, we certainly ought to be willing to do things like that for our neighbors.

As we grow up, and go through life in this world we will see, learn and understand that all people who are wonderful and great are at the same time humble. They are humble, that is, they do not talk much or boast about their great deeds and their fine qualities. And why do they not? Because they know so well that all these things come from the Lord alone. They know so surely that without the Lord's gifts and help, they would not be able to do anything at all. For this reason, they are also willing to do very unpleasant, small and lowly tasks for their neighbors.

So the Lord washed the disciples' feet. And great men stoop to do small favors for other people. Then surely we, who are not so great as they, who are as nothing compared to the Lord, could and should do good deeds for others, no matter how humble and unpleasant these duties may be. When your parents ask you to do some little task, you should not be ashamed to do it; nor should you dislike doing it. And you will, in time, take the greatest delight in doing just such things if you will always remember the example that the Lord has given us. For this is why the Lord has given us this example: in order that we might be given the delights and joys of heaven through following His example and His commandment.

Now let us think of the first reason the Lord gave for His washing the disciples' feet. You remember He said to Peter, "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with Me." Did the Lord mean that He gave them a part in His great work just by washing their feet? Surely not. What did He mean then? In order to find out the meaning, let us remember what the Lord said about Himself in another part of His Word. He said, "I am Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last." The Lord meant by this that He is not only in the highest or first things, but also in the lowest or last things. He made not only the sun of heaven, but He also made the lowest things—the earth and all things in it, down to the very ground in which grow trees, flowers, vegetables and fruits. And all these things that the Lord made, in which He is, down to the very lowest, He made for the use of man—for our use—in order that we might live and move and breathe. In this way, the Lord continually serves us, even in the very smallest and lowest things. And this is what He meant when He washed the disciples' feet; for, as we have seen, washing another's feet is one of the lowest and smallest of all tasks.

But there is something else meant in this example. The Lord actually washes all of us in another way. What in us are the meanest and lowest things? Are they not the bad things, we do and want to do? Are they not our wishes to disobey our parents and teachers? Are they not the little mean things we say and do to our friends and companions? Yes, these are the unclean things that the Lord washes from our feet; that means that He takes them away from the lowest parts of our minds. He takes them out of our minds, and He takes away our wish to do them. And why does He do this? Because He loves us. And so He wants us to have the highest happiness. And He knows that He can only give us that happiness if we draw near to Him. But we cannot draw near to Him until evil things are taken away from us. For the Lord is all Good, and evil things take us far away from Him. That is why He wishes to remove these evils, to wash us. And it is only by washing us, by removing our evils that He can draw us to Him, and so give us a part with Him.

But the Lord cannot wash our sins from us unless we try to do something to wash ourselves. This is why there are so many places in the Word where we are commanded to wash ourselves. The Lord cannot give us heavenly joy and

happiness unless we try to put away from us evil thoughts, bad wishes and mean deeds. Of course, we cannot really cure ourselves from evil. But neither can the Lord put evil away from us, unless we at least try to do something ourselves. This is why the Jews were commanded to wash their feet before worshiping the Lord.

You will find this to be true, if you try it. For every time you gladly obey your parents, or stop from doing some wrong thing, you will find that your wish to disobey and to do wrong things, is not so strong as it was before. This is the Lord washing you, taking away that wish. But you must remember that you must do something yourself to stop. For that is why Naaman, the leper, was told by the prophet Elisha to go and wash himself in the river Jordan, and he would then be healed by the Lord. This is also why several times the Lord told sick people to go and wash themselves, and they would be healed.

And we see this even more plainly in the commandment given in the Old Testament: Wash you, make you clean... put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes. Cease to do evil; learn to do well.”

And why should we do these things? The Lord Himself answers our question in the last verse of our lesson: “If ye know these things, happy are ye if you do them.” He will come and make His abode with us; He will dwell with us, and His Presence will give us happiness and peace. To do the things the Lord teaches is also a commandment, just as other words of the Lord are. And the Lord also said, “If a man love Me, he will keep My words; and My Father will love him, and We will come unto him, and make Our abode with him. If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.”

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“He that hath been washed, needeth not save to wash his feet,’ signifies that he who has been reformed, has need only to be cleansed as to natural things, that is, has need that evils and falsities should be removed from them; and then all things are disposed into order by the influx of spiritual things from the Lord. Moreover to wash the feet was an office of charity, as meaning not to reflect on the evils of another; and it was also an office of humility, as meaning to cleanse another from evils as from impurities.

“Everybody can see that washing himself does not purify any one from evils and falsities, but only from the impurities that cling to him; nevertheless, as washing was among the rites commanded in the church, it follows that it involves something special, namely, spiritual washing, that is, purification from the uncleannesses which inwardly adhere to man.”