

The Lord Who Washes Feet

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[0 : 00] That's tonight, the next 15 minutes, we're going to be listening to God speak to us through John chapter 13. So if you could open your Bible to page 900, that will be helpful for this endeavor.

John chapter 13. At this point in the gospel, tomorrow Jesus will be convicted and tortured and crucified.

Tonight he's going to be betrayed and denied and mocked. And so now in the quietness and stillness before the storm, the Savior of the world savors his last few hours with his disciples. The scene is a small room. It's private. It's quiet. It's intimate. And there's no doubt that there's a feeling of sobriety thick in the air.

As Jesus and his disciples are sharing, in a sense, one of their last meals together. And our text tells us in verse 4 that suddenly Jesus rises up from the supper table.

[1 : 10] He lays aside his outer garments. He takes a towel and he ties it around his waist. And now that Jesus has dressed himself like a servant, like a slave.

Verse 5, we are told that Jesus pours water into a basin. He begins to wash his disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that is wrapped around him.

And as we read these few verses, we witness one of the most shocking events, I figure, that has ever crossed the stage of world history. As the Lord of the universe washes feet.

Now it's important that we know that this is a major turning point in the ministry of Jesus Christ. A major turning point. And John wants us to be utterly clear about what is going on here. So he introduces this foot washing scene in verse 1.

Take a look at verse 1, chapter 13. Now before the feast of the Passover, Passover is the next day, when Jesus knew that his hour had come, his hour to be put on the cross, to depart out of this world to his Father, having loved his own who are in the world, John tells us that Jesus loved them to the end.

[2 : 27] To the end. Now I think that means two things. I think first that means that Jesus loved him to the end as far as duration. To the very end of his life, even unto death.

But I think even more profoundly, what John is telling us, is that Jesus, telling us about the depth of Jesus' love. He loved them to the end.

Meaning Jesus loved them to the greatest possible degree. To completion. To fullness. To perfection. So what we're being told by John is that the focus of this foot washing scene is about the depth of Jesus' extravagant love for his disciples.

In the first half of John's gospel, the two words that dominate the narrative are light and life. Light is used some 32 times and life is used some 50 times.

But at this point, the gospel hinges. And those words take backstage as the word love takes center stage. It's used some 31 times leading up to the cross.

[3 : 32] The focus of what we celebrate tonight, of what we celebrate tomorrow, of what we celebrate on Easter Sunday, is nothing less than the extravagance and depth of the divine love that is about to be poured out for the whole entire world.

It's amazing. And it all begins with this little scene of a Lord washing feet. Jesus puts his hands into the dirtiest and most shameful parts of our humanity.

And this would be utterly unthinkable in any context, but especially in the ancient world. Even at a purely human level, this is an utterly shocking scene.

I mean, have any of you actually had your feet washed before? I don't mean like a pedicure or foot massage. I mean real foot washing. About eight years ago, I had an opportunity to go on a camping trip with about 80 people, a little island off the coast of Southern California, off the coast of Los Angeles.

It's August, so the heat is sweltering at about 35 to 37 degrees Celsius. We had a six-day camping trip. We weren't allowed to take showers or swim in any body of water the whole entire time.

[4 : 45] We did an average of 10 to 12 hours of hiking a day in dusty, dirty roads, and I was gross. My friends and I were so gross, being like 20 years old, we started taking antibacterial soap and just rubbing it all over ourselves, hoping that would deal with the smell.

Anyways, that's too much detail for you. The point is, is that at the end of this camping trip, my boss then told the group of people I was with, he said, all right, now I want to wash your feet.

The very end of this camping trip. So we're kind of like peeling our socks off. And he gets down and he puts his hands between our toes and he washes our feet. It was not a pretty sight.

It was awkward. It felt weird. And it wasn't a pretty sight 2,000 years ago either. Ancient Middle Eastern context means that feet were the dirtiest and most shameful part of who you are.

Sweltering heat, dusty roads, open-toed shoes, sweaty feet, means that you had quite a deadly combination. And so it was no mistake that there was a huge social and cultural stigma around washing feet.

[5 : 55] Only inferiors were allowed to wash somebody else's feet. It was the job of servants and slaves. And if you read the Jewish and the Greco-Roman literature of the ancient world, there's actually not one example in all the literature of a superior washing the feet of an inferior.

That just never, ever happened. So you can imagine the shock and dismay on the disciples' faces when all of a sudden Jesus gets up from the table in the middle of a meal, lays aside his outer garments, takes up a towel, ties it around him, does the act of a slave, pours water into a basin, begins to wash their feet, and wipes their feet with the towel around him.

What the disciples are witnessing here, and what we are witnessing, brothers and sisters, is literally something that has never happened in all of history up to this point. It's astonishing.

At the human level, it's utterly shocking. But the scene gets even more shocking, even more shocking, when we realize that Jesus isn't just a noble teacher washing the feet of his disciples.

He's not just a superior human being washing the feet of inferior human beings. He is the sovereign Lord of the universe, washing the feet of creatures.

[7 : 19] Look at verse 3. John wants us to get this too. Verse 3. Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper.

Right before Jesus does this act, John tells us that Jesus knows who he is. He's the sovereign Lord of the universe. He's got all power and all authority over all people and all things.

He's come from God, and he's going to God. He's not forgotten who he is, and he's not rejected who he is. Jesus knows who he is when he does this humble act of service.

And what's astonishing about this is that what Jesus does is not some contradiction of the fact that he's God, and that he's glorious, and that he's powerful. But rather, in washing feet, he expresses most fully what it means for him to be the Lord.

There was a famous preacher in the city of Constantinople in the 5th century, modern-day Istanbul.

[8 : 30] His name was Severian of Gabala. Now, I think he describes Jesus beautifully here. Listen to what he says. He says, He says, The creator of the universe, showing us that true majesty and power and glory take the form of humble slave washing feet.

And it's at this point that all of our human conceptions of God come crashing down and smashed and obliterated into pieces. This is a very different Lord than we humans tend to come up with.

A 20th century thinker named Karl Barth was so amazed by this passage that he wrote this. He said, He said, Friends, the radical shock of our passage in John chapter 13 is the radical humility of our Lord.

The Lord washes feet. And he washes the dirtiest, and most disgusting, and most undesirable part of who we are. And the Lord Jesus shows us that true Lordship for him is revealed in humility.

His power in weakness, his glory in suffering, and his love in service. This is the Lord that we worship as we enter into Holy Week. Now, that being said, I think there are two radical implications for our lives that come out of this.

[11 : 11] If this is who the Lord really is, then there's two major implications. The first comes in verses 6 to 8. If we want to honor the Lord, Jesus as Lord, it means we have to let him love us.

We have to let him serve us. Look at verse 6 with me. Jesus came to Simon Peter, who said to him, Lord, do you wash my feet?

And Jesus answered him, what I am doing, you do not understand now. But afterward, you will understand. Meaning after the cross. Then verse 8, Peter said to him, you shall never wash my feet.

It's as if Peter saying, this is too low for you, Lord. This is too shameful for you, Lord. This isn't your job. I can wash my own feet, or I can wash your feet, but you shouldn't wash my feet. And then look at how Jesus responds to him.

So tenderly and so softly in a sense, but firmly. Jesus says, if you do not, if I do not wash you, Peter, you have no share with me.

[12:16] It's as if Jesus turns the whole thing upside down and says, if we want to have anything to do with him, if we really want to know him as our Lord, if we really want to be his friends, we first have to let him wash our feet.

We have to receive from him. We got to let him do the dirty, unthinkable work that we think is beneath him. And we have to let him do it in our lives. Jesus is basically saying, you cannot be proud before me, the humble Lord.

Lord, you must let me love the dirtiest and the most unlovable part of you. And you must let me take my holy hands and put them into your sin and put them into your shame and put them into your failure and wash and cleanse and heal and renew.

Because I'm the Lord who washes feet. I'm the Lord who does the unthinkable. So the first thing we see here is that to honor Jesus Christ as Lord is simply to let him serve us, to let him love us in this way, to let him wash our feet.

And the second thing we see comes in verse 12. That to honor Jesus as Lord means loving other people. Look at verse 12.

[13:37] When Jesus had washed their feet and put his outer garments on and resumed his place, he said to them, do you understand what I've done to you? You call me teacher and Lord and you are right for so I am.

If I then, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example that you also should do just as I have done.

Skip over to verse 34. Jesus reiterates this. A new commandment I give to you, says Jesus, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.

Isn't this interesting, friends? Jesus serves us and then in this passage, he doesn't ask us to serve him in return. Jesus doesn't ask us to wash his feet in return.

Jesus actually doesn't want us to wash his feet. Rather, Jesus wants us to wash other people's feet. So he says, I wash your feet, you wash other people's feet.

[14:48] That's how this works. I think the person who's captured this best is a guy named Leslie Newbigin. He was a missionary to India and listen to what he says here. Last quote, I promise. Jesus has laid aside his life for us all, says Leslie Newbigin.

And the debt which we owe to Jesus is to be discharged by our subjection to our neighbor in loving service. And here's the key line. Our neighbor is the appointed agent authorized to receive what we owe to the master.

I'm going to say that one more time. Our neighbor is the appointed agent authorized to receive what we owe to the master. So it's as if what Jesus is saying to us is that we are meant to give to each other what we rightfully owe to him.

We're meant to do for each other what he did for us in washing our feet. So when I come home at the end of the day, I owe to my wife, Susie, what I owe to my master to wash her feet and love her. I owe to my parents and my siblings and my kids and my family what I owe to the master. I owe to my coworkers and my friends and the people sitting in the pew next to me, behind me, front me, to the side of me.

[16:08] I owe them what I owe the master that I kneel down just as the humble Lord and I lovingly wash as best I can.

It's no wonder that Jesus says in verse 35, By this all people will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.

Brothers and sisters, this is what Maundy Thursday is all about. Maundy comes from the Latin word *mandatum* which simply means mandate or command.

A new commandment I give to you that you are to love one another. Why? Because we are never more like our Lord and we're never more like our God than when we simply get down on our knees

and wash each other's feet because that's precisely what he did.
In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.