

## Lessons from the Upper Room

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***Now that I, your Lord and Teacher,  
have washed your feet,  
you also should wash one another's feet*** (John 13:14).

What did Jesus mean, when in the Upper Room, addressing his much less than perfect disciples, said: ***you also should wash one another's feet***?

Is footwashing a requirement for all Christ's followers in the same category as Baptism and the Lord's Supper? Are there answers to whether footwashing is symbolic or literal in John chapter 13?

In his lead-in to the footwashing story in that chapter, John emphasises the love Jesus had for this team that had been with him for three years: ***Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.*** Having constantly loved his disciples, he now showed them the full extent of his love. One of them was going to betray him, another deny he had ever met Christ, and the rest were going to disown him and run for it. Yet, his love would not let them go. His love was relentless and unending.

What he was about to do was a tangible and dramatic way of showing how much he loved them. Jesus, fully aware of his identity and destiny stooped low to wash his disciples feet.

He was about to rescue the whole of humanity by dying for our sins, and yet did something menial for these very ordinary and unfaithful followers. That's unlike most of us. When we are absorbed in doing something grand, we find it hard to care for little people.

John 13:3 says: ***Jesus knew that he had come from God and was returning to God.*** He had already laid aside his robes of heavenly glory and put on humanity as a garment. Now he literally took off his outer cloak, wrapped a towel around his waist and washed his disciples' dirty feet. He radically humbled himself by doing the job of a slave.

The disciples entered the room and filed past the towel and the bowl. They had after all been arguing about who was the greatest. Now the truly Great One stooped to wash their feet. What about you? When there is a demeaning job to do, do you stoop and serve, or wait for someone else less important to make a move?

The Twelve were probably embarrassed when Jesus washed their feet. Peter clearly was. He said, ***Lord, are you going to wash my feet?*** It's hard to be a servant but sometimes even harder to allow someone to serve you.

Jesus' answer, ***You do not realize now what I am, doing, but later you will understand,*** showed Peter had missed the point of what Jesus was doing. Peter objected. It's as if he was saying, "You shall never for all eternity wash my feet." Jesus

answered, ***Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.*** What did Jesus mean? There are at least two possibilities: Unless he washed Peter's sins away by his death on the Cross, then Peter could have no eternal relationship with him. Or, unless Peter submitted to Jesus, he would never learn the lesson of humility. Both are true to the context. Footwashing was a powerful symbol of humility but also of spiritual cleansing through forgiveness of sins.

That reminds me of our youngest son when he was five years old. My wife Elaine dressed him for church and warned him not to get dirty. Ten minutes later he came in crying. His knees and clothes were covered in mud. Elaine didn't say, "Go away. You are no longer my child." No. She said a few choice words as mothers do, put on new clothes and cleaned his knees.

So how should footwashing be practiced in our day? Very few churches in the last 2000+ years have required regular literal footwashing. However, periodically washing each other's feet, as a way of modeling true humility and reminding ourselves of the joy of sins forgiven, can be a very moving experience.

During Barnabas School of Leadership pastoral cohorts in Africa and Asia, for example we have witnessed how moving it is to teach from John 13 and follow that with a literal footwashing. That Jesus, knowing Judas and Peter's betrayal and desertion was immanent, showed his relentless love by washing their feet, has moved pastors to the core.

Some pastors in Nepal, knowing that there was conflict in their leadership, when they returned home, taught from John 13 and washed each of their leaders' feet. Tears flowed and reconciliation broke out. Others in Africa testified that since the reenactment of the Upper Room footwashing, there has been much more gentle, humble servant-leadership shown in their homes and ministries.

Whose feet, symbolically or literally might you need to wash?

Consider these three questions and possible responses:

1. How aware are you of the relentless love of the Lord Jesus for you, despite your waywardness? Humble yourself and allow Jesus to wash your feet.
2. How frequently do you confess your sins, and rejoice in the ***washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit*** (Titus 3:5)? Like John in Revelation 1:5, Worship him who loves you and has washed you from your sins by his blood.
3. How might you, figuratively or literally, wash the feet of people you are not relating well to? Practice Peter's words: ***All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another...*** (1 Peter 5:5).