Wash Whose Feet?

Abigail is one of the most underrated Old Testament Bible characters. The Bible says in 1 Samuel 25 that this wise, beautiful woman was married to one of the sorriest men in biblical history; the Scriptures describe her wealthy husband, Nabal, as harsh and evil.

After providing protection for Nabal's shepherds in the wilderness, David asks in return for food for his men when they were in a bind. Nabal disrespectfully refuses – not a good way to treat a warrior so legendary that women sing about him, he “has slain his ten thousands” (1 Samuel 18:7). When David receives word from his servants of Nabal's offense, he rallies four hundred men to go with him to slaughter every male on Nabal's property. Meanwhile, one of Nabal’s men informs Abigail of the kindness of David and his men in the wilderness and warns of David’s certain vengeance upon Nabal. Without consulting Nabal, Abigail urgently prepares a large amount of food as a peace offering. When she meets David, Abigail falls to the ground on her face and begs David to overlook Nabal's great wrong. David's intense anger subsides and he praises Abigail for her kindness and wise counsel. When David hears that Nabal dies ten days later, he sends his servants with a proposal of marriage to Abigail. How did this wealthy, beautiful widow respond? The Bible says in 1 Samuel 25:41, “Then she arose, bowed her face to the earth, and said, ‘Here is your maidservant, a servant to wash the feet of the servants of my lord.’"

In that time and place, servants or slaves usually perform the long standing custom in the East of washing guests’ feet, but Abigail humbly declares her unworthiness for marriage to David by suggesting that she wash the feet of David’s servants. This only solidifies David’s determination to marry her.

We find in one of Jesus’ final hours with His disciples that He teaches His true followers to wash one another’s feet. But what, exactly, did Jesus mean? Whose feet should we be washing and how should we be doing it, after our song...

I read recently about a preacher who applies with wooden literalness some of Jesus’ teachings. This preacher travels on foot across the United States and other countries carrying a large wooden cross and a large bowl so he can wash the feet of all he meets. His reenactment of Jesus’ serving and suffering garners attention and a venue to share the gospel, but I hesitate to follow.

Did Jesus bind literal cross-carrying on the Lord’s church? It is only natural for a twenty-first century Bible student to ask as he reads through John’s gospel, “Did Jesus bind foot washing?”

Do you consider yourself a Christian? If so, when did you last wash someone’s feet? If you rip the following words from John 13:14-15 from the greater context of the chapter, it looks like Jesus mandates foot washing, “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 should do as I have done to you.” Open and shut, right?

A host of churches, in fact, including Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Catholics observe foot washing in a service on “Maundy Thursday of Holy Week.” Some Adventists, Anabaptists, Baptists, and Pentecostals practice foot washing more regularly.

We are so accustomed to washing our own feet that it strikes us to read about the Son of God washing the disciple’s feet. Think about it. How dirty do your feet get anyway? Many people work all day at
places where they don’t even get their shoes dirty. We walk on clean carpet, tile floors, and sidewalks. Perhaps the modern parallel would be more like washing someone’s tires.

Let’s get the cultural context behind what took place in John 13. H. L. E. Luering writes in the foot article in The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia:

“The dusty roads of Palestine and other eastern lands make a much greater care of the feet necessary than we are accustomed to bestow upon them. The absence of socks or stockings, the use of sandals and low shoes rather than boots and, to an even greater degree, the frequent habit of walking barefoot make it necessary to wash the feet repeatedly every day. This is always done when entering the house... It is a common dictate of good manners to perform this duty to a visitor, either personally or through a servant; at least water for washing has to be presented (Genesis 18:4; Luke 7:44). This has therefore become almost synonymous with the bestowal of hospitality (1 Timothy 5:10). At an early date this service was considered one of the lowest tasks of servants (1 Samuel 25:41), probably because the youngest and least trained servants were charged with the task, or because of the idea of defilement connected with the foot.... The undoing of the latchets or leather thongs of the sandals (Mark 1:7; Luke 3:16; John 1:27) seems to refer to the same menial duty....”

So, Jesus does not initiate a new ordinance to be performed in a worship service. Footwashing was the normal private, individual demonstration of hospitality. In fact, we never find this activity commanded or practiced in ANY New Testament congregation. Instead, Jesus taught the Twelve in this act, and, by extension, ALL disciples the importance of unselfishness, kindness, humility, serving, and submission. Jesus is washing the disciples' feet when He says in John 13:7, "What I am doing you DO NOT understand now, but you will know after this." If Jesus intends to bind foot washing, He would not have uttered these words; that would have been nonsense! They KNEW Jesus was washing their feet but He told them you DO NOT know now what I am doing. Jesus was teaching a bigger, broader lesson that would involve much more than filthy feet.

Let’s see what actually happens. John 13:3-4, “Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself.” Jim McGuiggan says, “There were thirteen men in the upper room that night. Twelve lords and one servant. Yes, twelve lords and one servant! Only one in that room knew anything about service. The others had just been having a quarrel about who was the greatest.” And it wasn’t the first time.

We read in Luke 22:24-27, “And there arose also a dispute among them as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest. And He said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called “Benefactors.” But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant. For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves.” Jesus serves them in the most humble way when He washes their feet.

Earlier, when James and John come with their mother to ask for the top two seats in the kingdom, Jesus calls a timeout. Matthew 20:25-28, “But Jesus called them to Himself and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall NOT be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave--just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.’" Jesus shows how their scratching
and clawing to get to the top is totally out of character with His purpose. He says, “If you want to be my disciples, follow my lead. Serve and give. Serve and give.”

Powerfully direct verbal instruction, but nothing penetrates their thick skulls like Jesus practicing what He preaches... on His knees with a towel and basin. Keep in mind that Jesus knows the strain of the grueling schedule now racing at Him: his betrayal, sleepless night, unjust trials, the vicious beating, and the crucifixion. Still, this teaching is too crucial to omit from his itinerary.

John 13:5, “After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.” The disciples watch, as on His knees, Jesus methodically serves them. Their minds must have been spinning in the silence, thinking, “What in the world is going on?” But when Jesus gets to Peter, he can’t keep quiet; He challenges Jesus, "Lord, are You washing my feet?" Jesus says in John 13:7, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this." Peter objects, "You shall NEVER wash my feet!" Are we at an impasse? No! Jesus answers, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." Peter then swings to the opposite extreme, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!" You gotta love Peter!

After alluding to Judas’ evil plans, Jesus tells the others in John 13:14-16, “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 should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him.” J. W. McGarvey says the point is: “Since a servant is not greater than his lord, he should not be ashamed to do what his lord does.” In other words, Jesus says, "If I can do it, you can do it! And then the bonus -- John 13:17, “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.” In other words, it is actually in your OWN best interest to wash others feet; you will be blessed in so doing. This is similar to Jesus’ paradoxical words in Acts 20:35, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

Who would have predicted that the Messiah, the Son of God, heaven’s best, would come to earth and get down on His hands and knees to wash the filthy feet of common men? Jesus’ act is a microcosm, a miniature, a snapshot of Jesus’ heart that points to the nature of the Godhead three. This is for mature Christians. Some may never get this well enough to implement in their own lives. Jesus models a spirit of unselfishness, humility, service, submission, and kindness. The apostle Paul sums up Jesus’ mind and mission in Philippians 2:5-8, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.”

Jesus teaches by example that the way up is clearly down. He starts higher than mightiest of men and above all angels as God, but rides the elevator of insignificance, as it were, all the way to the basement. Jesus could stoop no lower than to wash those dirty feet. He didn’t seek the disciples’ admiration; He sought their imitation. Jesus also wants US to follow His example.

If asked to wash Jesus’ feet, what professing believer would refuse? Why, people would line up for miles! But Jesus didn’t ask the disciples to wash HIS feet; He asked the disciples to wash one another’s feet. Why are we more enthusiastic about washing Jesus’ feet? That’s easy, isn’t it, on reflection? Jesus is better than we are, right? He is sinless! And, what’s more, He has done so much for us that we are in His debt. He is so deserving of my serving! But the guy next door or the fella on
the next pew? No way! “He’s got a bad attitude; he’s lazy; he’s only looking out for himself.” Are you getting my point? We think WE are better than the other guy; we are at least their equals; they are certainly not superior to me! Jesus wants us to get over that mentality. He helps when He says in Matthew 25:40, “…inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.” So, how would your home life change if you announced to your family, “Listen. I am going to start serving you so often and in so many ways that you will get tired of all my serving?” Now, IF you lived up to such a commitment, you would rock their world and revolutionize your home environment. I’m trying harder to do that myself!

In important and incidental relationships, most of us are somewhere between the “holding up our feet” and the “getting on our knees” stages. By my attitude and actions, which do I say more often, “On your knees!” or “Give me your foot?” Are you washing others’ feet at home, at church, at work, at school, in traffic, et cetera OR do you expect others -- or even tell others by your words and actions, “wash my feet?” Are you looking for others to wait on or do you expect others to constantly wait on you? Some people really get this and it is beautiful to behold. Some people in my life without ever talking about it or even seeming conscious that they are doing it, so constantly, consistently wash my feet that it’s a wonder they do not make my feet bleed! My wife leads the pack, but a dozen others do the same. They brighten my life, but more importantly, they reflect the love of Jesus Christ. It’s not so much that I see it as that Christ sees it.

A brother in Christ washed my feet when he helped with medical bills about to ruin us. You wash others’ feet when you help those with legitimate need. You wash their feet when you make time to babysit, visit the lonely, or hospitalized. You wash others’ feet when you cook a meal, clean the house, or mow the lawn of a family devastated by illness or the passing of a loved one. We could make a very long list.

Jesus teaches us to show kindness in John 13. The Bible says in Proverbs 3:27, “Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, When it is in the power of your hand to do so.” The apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 6:4-6, “But in all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God…by kindness,” Galatians 5:22, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness…” Colossians 3:12, “Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness…” 2 Peter 1:7, “add to godliness brotherly kindness,”

Even if you have physical, financial, or transportation limitations that prevent you from washing the feet of others in some of these ways, you can send a kind and encouraging note or card, a brief text, email or phone message. William Arthur Ward adds in this vein, “A warm smile is the universal language of kindness.”

Jesus washed others’ feet by healing them of sicknesses and diseases. Jesus did not come to earth to remove all illness, disease, and disability, but with the powers He possessed, when He came face to face with men, women, and children tormented by sickness, pain, and physical infirmity, He deeply desired to relieve their suffering by serving their needs.

I am not Jesus; neither are you. And while we do not have Jesus’ miraculous healing power, we have the next best gift, don’t we? Through prayer, genuine Christians have a great power for physical and emotional healing. What does your prayer list look like? You don’t have to be young to pray; you don’t have to be strong; you don’t have to have transportation; you don’t have to have money to pray. All you need to bless others through prayer is membership in the body of Christ, a caring heart, and the willingness to set aside a little time to serve the needs of others. You don’t have to have the voice of James Earl Jones or the volume of the Phantom of the Opera to be heard by God. Prayer doesn’t have
to be a big production; it is not intended to be the great dramatic performance some make out of it. Jesus calls them hypocrites. Matthew 6:5-6, “And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.”

Jesus teaches us that sometimes love means getting our hands dirty; it means doing that which is unpleasant. The Spirit tells us in Galatians 5:13, “through love serve one another.” Perhaps the hardest lesson Jesus teaches is that there is no one too low for us to serve. If Jesus washed even the feet of Judas the traitor, whose feet are we too good to wash? Jesus shows me that I must rise above bitterness, hatred, and revenge to love even my enemies (Matthew 5:44), “bless those who curse [me], do good to those who hate [me], and pray for those who spitefully use [me] and persecute [me].” You can see why some would prefer to wash the literal feet of friends or even strangers over living out the deeper message Jesus presented.

Christians certainly wash others’ feet when we risk rejection to reach out to them with the good news about forgiveness.

Deuteronomy 11:13, “And it shall be that if you earnestly obey My commandments which I command you today, to love the LORD your God and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul,”

In Luke 7, a notoriously sinful woman came and stood behind Jesus “weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil.” Some in the room did not appreciate her behavior, but Jesus did. She demonstrated her humility and love for Jesus and her willingness to submit to Him. Honoring Jesus was now her priority. Today, you can humble yourself and begin serving Jesus. Some will not appreciate you fully submitting to the plan of salvation; but Jesus will. Jesus says in Mark 16:16, “He that believes and is baptized shall be saved…” Won’t you begin serving Jesus today? Stay with us for a final word after our song…

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