

Gospel of John 13:1-17¹

Why Did Jesus Wash His Disciples' Feet?

Initial Scripture Reading.

Philippians 2:1-11: “1 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. 5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; 7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death- even death on a cross! 9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

During the last supper Jesus performs an unexpected act. He washes the feet of his disciples. This could only have caused consternation in the disciples. In the

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ancient world, a superior never washed the feet of an inferior.² But not even people of the same social rank washed each other's feet. Washing people's feet was the job of lowly servants. And yet here the Lord of the universe washes the feet of twelve men, including the one who was about to betray him. What did Jesus desire to accomplish by performing this gesture? This is what we want to talk about now, under three headings: a demonstration of love (vv. 1-5), a symbol of purification (vv. 6-11) and a model of behavior (vv. 12-17).

FIRST POINT: A DEMONSTRATION OF LOVE (vv. 1-5)

First of all, the washing of the feet is a demonstration of love. We see this in John 13:1-5: “1 It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. 2 The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. 3 Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; 4 so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. 5 After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.”

Finally, the chain of events begins that will bring Jesus to the cross arrives. That cross, where Jesus will glorify the Father, giving himself to redeem sinners like you

² This detail comes from p. 462 of D.A. Carson's commentary on John; the other cultural data is taken from the same page.

and me. It is sure accurate to say that the Last Supper takes place in the shadow of the cross. On the cross Jesus will undergo the righteous judgment of God, in addition to the physical torture of being crucified. Not many hours from now, on the cross, Jesus will cry out: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

But before that Jesus will go to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. There Jesus will tell his disciples that he is "overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (Mark 14:34); and he will ask the Father if that if possible, he be spared "the cup" of suffering of the cross (v. 36). All this will come close on the heels of the Last Supper about which Jesus had told his disciples: "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15). But Jesus is not held captive to, and paralyzed by, the anguish of all he will go through in not many hours. Quite to the contrary, he's thinking of the disciples.

And who is this who is thinking of others, just before his betrayal? The Son of God, the Messiah. Verse 3 points out that in this difficult moment Jesus is fully aware of his own identity. Even though he is walking in the valley of the shadow of death, he has no doubts about who he is. He is the beloved Son of God, the one in whose hands the Father had given everything; the Messiah, the one who had come from God and who would soon return to him.

The Son of God knows that Judas will betray him shortly. Jesus has the power to take him out right now. Jesus could also eliminate Satan, with the blink of an eye. Could it be that the terrible anguish Jesus is going through, combined with his full

awareness of who he is, might push Jesus to a show of force, an open demonstration of his power and authority, to show everyone, not least his disciples, who he is? No. Instead, Jesus chooses to perform a servile act to show who he is. He does this to demonstrate the greatness of his love, to demonstrate his love “to the end” (NIV).

So in verse 4 we see that Jesus changes and dresses as a servant. He puts water in a basin and begins to wash the disciples' feet. From Peter's reaction, we know that this unexpected act makes the disciples feel very uncomfortable. It's just not right for a superior to wash the feet of an inferior. There is something wrong here. There is something shocking here.

In fact, the love of God is not logical. God's love is unexpected and shocking. The love of God does not condemn the prodigal Son but welcomes him. The love of God does not despise Zacchaeus but calls him down from the tree. The love of God does not send the sinful woman away but accepts her perfumed oil and tears. The love of God does not ignore the tax collectors but calls Levi to be one of the twelve.

The love of God does not leave us in our sins but provides for our redemption.

SECOND POINT: A PURIFICATION SYMBOL (vv. 6-11)

The foot washing is a demonstration of love. But it is also a symbol of purification. We see this in verses 6-11: “6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" 7 Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." 8 "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." 9

"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" 10 Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." 11 For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean."

On an emotional level, the foot washing upsets the disciples. On a physical level, the it removes the filth from their feet. But on a deeper level, the foot washing symbolizes something else. It symbolizes purification from sin. The cross purifies from sin. The foot washing symbolizes this purification.

Perhaps Peter's main fault is that he has the courage to say what everyone is thinking. This happens several times in the New Testament. Surely all the disciples would have been willing to wash Jesus' feet. From the viewpoint of the custom of that time, this would have been logical. So in verse 6, Peter clarifies the problem. "You wash my feet"-- this, Lord, is not a good thing. You are the superior, I am the inferior. You can't wash my feet. It just wouldn't be right.

Peter is thinking about etiquette, appropriateness. He doesn't understand and cannot understand what Jesus is doing. In verse 7, Jesus says frankly that, only after the Passion, will they be able to understand. What is it that Peter and the others are unable to understand at this time? That the servile gesture of Jesus symbolizes the two aspects of purification of sin.

Jesus' death cleanses us from sin in two ways. First, Jesus cleanses us from the penalty of sin. On the cross Jesus suffers in our place. He takes upon itself the judgment that we deserve. This is how Jesus makes us presentable to the Father. This is a complete washing, outside and inside, from head to toe. A definitive washing that purifies us from the eternal punishment of sin. In verse 8 it is about this purification that Jesus says: "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." If Jesus does not take away the penalty of sin, we can have no relationship with a holy and perfect God.

At this point, in verse 9, contemplating the possibility of being excluded from the company of Jesus, Peter goes overboard, now in the opposite direction: "Lord...not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

Jesus uses Peter's exuberant outburst to teach the second aspect of our purification. Even believers need an occasional washing, really a frequent one! Because of the sacrifice of Christ, we are already washed definitively from the punishment of sin. However, in this world, we often get our feet dirty. Unfortunately, we commit sins, even after conversion. And the dirt we accumulate in this world interrupts our communion with God, just like in human relationships.

For example, when we fight with someone, we don't feel right until we apologize. Or, when our children disobey, they don't cease to be our children. However, because of disobedience, a type of interruption is created in their relationship with us. When a child of God disobeys their Heavenly Father, the same

thing happens. We no longer enjoy that sweet communion with the Lord. Here too the cross intervenes to reestablish our communion with God.

In verse 10, Jesus distinguishes the two types of purification. Believers are definitively washed. They don't need to be washed again in this way. They just need a little washing up, every now and then, to get rid of the street dirt. 1 John 1:9 tells us how we obtain this moral washing: by confessing our sins to the Lord. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

This, dear brothers and sisters, is something I must do often. I confess my sins to go and thus he restores my communion with him. I encourage you to do the same.

THIRD POINT: A MODEL OF BEHAVIOR (vv. 12-17)

So far we have said that the washing of the feet is a demonstration of love and also a symbol of purification. Now, finally, washing of the feet is a model of behavior. We see this in verses 12-17: "12 When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. 13 "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. 14 Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. 15 I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. 16 Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."

By washing the feet of the disciples, Jesus upsets them. The disciples would have preferred, by far, to be able to wash Jesus' feet. However, this honor does not grant them. But yes, he wants them to wash someone's feet: to each other. Jesus tells us to do just what we don't want to do: to consider and consequently treat others as if they were our superiors.³

We believe we are more important than others. We want to go past the supermarket. In traffic, we believe we are the only ones who are late. When we get to the cinema early we hope they start the film a little earlier. When we are late, we hope that the film also starts late. By nature, we are self-centered. We believe that our problems are the most pressing. By nature, we are selfish. We believe that our problems should be solved immediately.

Jesus wants to overthrow our world. He wants to turn it upside down. But He knows that we are slow and stubborn. You also know that the law was made, the deception found. He knows that just telling us, maybe it wouldn't have been enough. So it gives us an unmistakable and irrefutable example. The King of the universe washes the feet of his little creatures ... to give us a model to follow. We must do the same to each other.

In Romans 12.10, in Luzzi's translation, it is written: "As for brotherly love, be full of affection for one another; as for honor, prevent one another ... ". In other

³ In due degli stadi dell'umiltà, la Regola benedettina mette in evidenza che il monaco deve sentirsi e mostrarsi inferiore agli altri. "Il settimo stadio dell'umiltà consiste non soltanto nel dichiararsi a parole inferiore e più vile di tutti, ma anche nel crederci con il cuore...". Il dodicesimo stadio dell'umiltà per un monaco consiste nel mostrare sempre la propria umiltà a tutti coloro che lo osservano, non solamente nel cuore, ma anche nel suo atteggiamento esteriore." Citato da Tony Lane, Compendio del pensiero cristiano nei secoli (Formigine: Voce della Bibbia, 1994), p 114.
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words: Proceed in honoring one another. In our first reading we heard in Philippians 2:3: "each ... esteem others superior to himself ...". Here we are dealing with one of the keys to a healthy community life. In community life, protagonism is banned. In its place there must be a servile service towards others. How many problems would not exist if we Christians put this principle into practice? How much trouble would disappear instantly if we started washing each other's feet now?

We want to experience the blessing of the Lord. And here before, we find one of the beatitudes of the Bible. We all know the famous beatitudes of Matthew chapter 5. But even here we have a bliss - a bliss as precise as it is beautiful. Don't believe it? Let's look at verse 17 together: "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

The blessing does not come to us just because we know these things. The blessing comes to us when we put them into practice.

Maybe during the Holy Supper we can reflect on this principle, and maybe think of a concrete thing we could do to wash someone else's feet.

CONCLUSION.

During the Last Supper, Jesus shocked his disciples by doing something completely unexpected. And in doing so he wanted to give us 3 things: a demonstration of the greatness of his love, a clear symbol of purification, and an unforgettable model of behavior.