



Conducted by
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A brother from India has asked the following question:

"In John 13:14-15, the Lord Jesus said, '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 to you'. Why (do) not we practise this?"

Please read again **John 13: 1-20**, where the occasion to which our brother refers is described, and then consider what had occurred before it.

Mark 14:3 records that Jesus was at Bethany, a village on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, when He instructed two of His disciples to go ahead of Him into Jerusalem, to prepare for the celebration of the forth-coming Passover (vv. 13-15). That evening, He and the rest of the Twelve followed them into the city, to the Upper-Room which had now been made ready for the Passover meal.

From Bethany they had walked about two miles to Jerusalem, along dry, dusty roads, and had entered the Upper-Room with feet which were not only hot and uncomfortable, but dirty also.

We know, of course, that, in those days and in that culture, people did not wear socks or stockings as in western countries and other parts of the world, because the climate rendered them unnecessary. Their bare feet were covered only by open sandals.

We know also, that it was regarded as an essential courtesy, that when guests entered a house, the host should have arranged for a most welcome act of hospitality to be performed; namely, the washing of their tired feet.

A servant placed a bowl under the feet of the guest and cool, refreshing water was then poured over them, after which the feet would then be gently dried with the towel.

The book of Genesis records that this was one of the most ancient expressions of Eastern hospitality.

Gen. 18:4 records that Abraham extended it to his visitors.

Lot, also in the wicked city of Sodom, offered it to his visitors (**Gen. 19:2**).

We find it again in **Gen. 43:24**, when the sons of Jacob went to Egypt to buy food.

Thus, the washing of feet of a guest was a custom which had continued for thousands of years and which was woven into the very fabric of Middle Eastern culture.

THE CUSTOM NEGLECTED!

But, on this occasion, in the Upper-Room, this traditional act did not occur! The bowl, the pitcher of water and the towel, had all been provided, but there was no host present to greet the Lord and his disciples when they arrived, and no servant to wash their feet.

Jesus, therefore, waited to see if anyone among his disciples would volunteer to perform this service, which, though usually the duty of a household servant or slave, was considered a very important act.

Indeed, he waited until the supper was actually *over* (v.2). But, apparently, it did not enter the mind of any of the Twelve to volunteer to take on this menial role! It was plainly very far from their thoughts, because **Luke 22:24** tells us that, even in the Upper-Room, once again 'a dispute had arisen among the disciples, as to which of

them was to be regarded the greatest'. How sad it is that, whilst Jesus was burdened with the knowledge that a cross was awaiting Him, His closest disciples were insensitively thinking about crowns!

THE OLD DEBATE

I say that the dispute had arisen 'once again', because it was not new. Some time earlier (Mark 9:33-36), Jesus had overheard them having the same argument as they followed Him along the road, and when they reached their destination He had tried to teach them the lesson of humility and service, using a little child as an example.

They had clearly not learned the lesson.

There had also been another occasion, when the mother of James and John, no doubt prompted by her two sons, came to Jesus asking that they might sit with Him on thrones when His kingdom was established (Matt. 20:20). Verse 24 tells us that the rest of the disciples were angry with the two brothers, most probably because they felt that, with their request, James and John had stolen a march on them!

It was unlikely, then, that, in the mood which prevailed among them in the Upper Room that evening, any one of them would be willing to tie about himself the linen towel which was the badge of the household servant, and kneel to wash the feet of his fellows.

THE LORD'S EXAMPLE

We must, therefore, try to imagine the consternation and embarrassment experienced by the Twelve, when Jesus himself quietly arose from His place at the table and knelt before them to wash their feet! With the exception of the ever-impetuous Peter, it seems that no one spoke. The rest submitted in silence whilst this humble service was performed, until the Lord resumed His place at the table. It was then that He once again tried to make them understand that true greatness is demonstrated in the willingness to become a servant.

They had heard Him say on one occasion. *'The Son of Man came, not to be served, but to serve'*, and it does not appear that they understood the significance of that statement.

But this startling act of feet washing was different. It was something, which Peter certainly never forgot. In 1 Peter 5:5, he wrote,

'All of you, be subject to one another, and be clothed with humility: for God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble'.

A literal translation of the words, *'be clothed with humility'*, would be, *'put on humility as a knotted garment'*.

And if we could ask Peter how he came upon the illustration of the 'knotted garment', he would surely tell us, *'I learned it that night in the upper-room, when my Lord and Master clothed Himself with a servant's linen towel and knelt before me to wash my feet'*.

FEET-WASHING TODAY?

It is true that there are a few groups who today have turned the washing of feet into a formal religious ceremony, and it pleases them to think that in this way they are demonstrating humility. But theirs is a religious ceremony of their own manufacture, and it does not have the authority of a divine command.

In New Testament times the washing of feet was not a formal ceremony and it was certainly not a religious one. Indeed, it had no religious significance whatsoever. It was, as has already been stated, a common and customary act of hospitality and welcome, which any host would extend to his guests, and the fact is that, in modern western

society, such an act would not mean what it meant in those days.

Today we may just as effectively show that our guests are welcome, by offering them a cup of tea!

CONCLUSION: A DEEPER SIGNIFICANCE

What, then, are we to learn from what happened in the Upper-Room that evening?

We should remember that our Lord has a wonderful way of taking ordinary, everyday things and turning them into opportunities from which to teach important lessons.

Look upon the washing of the feet of the disciples as a kind of object-lesson.

Consider that He was giving them a practical demonstration of the spirit of humility which they must possess, if they were to become true servants. The *spoken word* had not evidently impressed them. Perhaps the performance of an *act of service* would.

I believe that the importance of the washing of the feet of the disciples was a far more urgent and serious matter than is usually recognised.

Notice the manner in which **John 13** introduces the scene from the Upper Room. John tells us, in v.3, that Jesus, fully aware that the time was close at hand when He should return to the Father from whom He came, rose from supper and proceeded to wash the feet of the disciples. This means that it was the knowledge of the imminence of His death and His return to the Father which prompted His action.

These men were to become His ambassadors, His apostles, who were to speak on His behalf. The first preaching of the Gospel and the leadership of the early Church, were among the grave responsibilities which He intended them to bear.

How could they fulfil their commission, if they continued to squabble among themselves as to who among them was the greatest? It was therefore imperative that they should realise that He had chosen them to serve and not to exercise lordship over each other.

The explanation of the Lord's action is found in His words in verses 12-17, which might be loosely rendered as follows:

"Have you really grasped what I have just done?"

You are right when you call me 'Lord', and 'Master' because I am truly your Lord and Master. But I have just been listening to you, as each of you have sought to elevate himself above his fellows. You all want to be 'lords' and 'masters', with the result that, this evening, you have ignored the opportunity to serve!

If I, then, who possess true Lordship, have been willing to become your servant, you have a moral obligation to serve each other.

You should now understand that I have, this evening, set you the example of service, and if you do understand, you will be happy to act on what you have learned."

There is no doubt those first Christians who lived in the lands of the New Testament continued the traditional social practice of the washing of feet. But it was not regarded by the early Church as a divinely-commanded religious ordinance, and we, likewise, must be careful to avoid making laws and devising ceremonies where the Lord has not done so.

In India, from where our brother has sent this question, for a traveller to have his feet washed may very well be a welcome act of kindness, bearing in mind the climate and the culture. But, to impose it on the Church as a religious ceremony and as a command of God, is an act which is both unauthorised by scripture and even

presumptuous.

We all need to cultivate the humility which enables us to accept the lowliest of tasks without complaining, and wherever we live, Christians should be mature enough to be able to find more useful ways than 'feet-washing' in which to demonstrate the spirit of the Lord Jesus, who told His disciples:

"Whoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve." (Matt. 20:27-28).

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