

Are you going to wash my feet? (John 13:1-17) – Encounters with Jesus 6: Peter

Peter is flabbergasted that Jesus would wash his feet. How can the one who is Messiah degrade himself and act like the lowest of slaves? Yet, Jesus's actions are designed to help Peter understand some very important truths.

The hour has come

Jesus's hour has come. It is the night before Jesus was going to be crucified. This is his last supper with his closest followers the disciples and the tensions below the surface are high. We're even told in verse 2 that one of his closest followers Judas Iscariot is now being prompted by the devil to betray Jesus.

This is a momentous night in the life of Jesus and his disciples. Jesus knows what is coming, he is in control, his task now is to help his disciples to know, to prepare them for the days ahead when they will be without Jesus in the world.

So, what does Jesus do? He washes their feet!

Are you going to wash my feet?

In a grand show Jesus removes his outer clothing, wraps a towel around his waist and begins to do what only a servant would be expected to do: he begins to wash his disciples feet.

In those days it was common for people to have their feet washed when they arrived for a meal. They wore sandals and the roads were dusty and often covered in animal dung or worse. But, to wash someone else's feet was seen as a very menial task. Many Jews even said that Jewish slaves shouldn't even be made to do it.

Yet, Jesus the one that the Twelve had come to revere as God's special person, the one who seemed to be claiming to be King of the Jews, the one who had the very words of eternal life, carefully and deliberately takes on this role of utter subservance.

Simon Peter thinks it is ridiculous and when Jesus comes to him he says in a kind of outrage: "Are you going to wash my feet?" In the original language the emphasis is on the pronouns: Are YOU, going to wash MY feet? You are the Messiah, the King of the Jews, the one sent from God. I'm just a disciple. How can you take on the role of a slave for me?

So, what is going on?

A Demonstration of Jesus's Love

Verse 1 tells us that this act by Jesus was to demonstrate his complete love for his disciples. The foot washing itself was not important, but it pointed forward to the immense importance of Jesus's death on the cross. The cross of course is Jesus's great act of love for the world.

But the foot washing showed the disciples and it shows us, what kind of love it was. It was a love of service for those who belong to Jesus in the world.

Just as washing the disciples feet was to take on a humble role for their sake, the role of the lowest of slaves, so Jesus's death on the cross was to enter into utter humiliation. Crucifixion itself carried out by the Romans was only allowed to be used on those who were not Romans. It was designed to humiliate the victims. On the cross, they were paraded before the crowds totally naked and utterly helpless as they died a slow tortuous and degrading death. The cross was all about humiliation.

But also just as washing the feet did something for the disciples - making their feet clean, so Jesus's death brings cleansing for all those that are his. His death cleanses us from the guilt and stain of our sin, and so makes us fit to become part of God's family. As John the Baptist said at the beginning of the gospel, pointing to Jesus, here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The foot washing was an act of service. But it was also an acted sign, that pointed to Jesus's greater act of service for those who are his. His death on the cross. This is the mission from the Father that Jesus knew he had to carry out.

Jesus, knew all this, but Simon Peter did not - at least not yet. As Jesus says in verse 7: "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

But, Jesus uses his act to help show what it meant to follow him. He used it as a clarification of faith and an example to follow.

A Clarification of Faith

So let's begin with the clarification of faith.

Accept Jesus's service - vs. 8

First of all it show us how important it is to accept Jesus's act of service.

To start with Simon Peter emphatically does not want to accept what Jesus is doing.

For Simon Peter this seemed a contradiction of how he saw his relationship to Jesus. Surely, if Jesus was God's special person, if he was the king of the Jews, then he shouldn't be behaving like a slave!

So he cries out: "No! You shall never wash my feet."

Jesus's response is short clear and to the point:

"Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

Now remember the foot washing was a sign that pointed towards the cross. What Jesus is saying to Simon Peter is true for all of us when it comes to the cross. Unless we are going to allow Jesus to serve us through his death on the cross we can have no part with him. If we do not accept that it is only through his death on the cross that our sins are washed away, then we cannot have a relationship with God, we cannot have eternal life.

This may be a challenge to some of you listening. You may think that it is how you serve God that determines your place with him in eternity. You may think that God will accept you because you have lived a good enough life or you've done enough religious activity to be in God's good books.

If that is what you think, then you are very badly mistaken. Jesus says unless you let me serve you, you can have no part with me. If your hope is based on what you've done for God, rather than on what God has done for you, then it is a hope that is in vain. It is an attitude that leads to death and not life. It is very far from the kind of faith that Jesus wants.

What Jesus is trying to show Simon Peter is that he needs to accept Jesus's service in order to be a part of his family.

Cling to Jesus - vs. 8b-9

And to Simon Peter's credit he does hear Jesus and accepts the service. He may not yet fully know all that Jesus has come to do, but he was convinced that what mattered more than anything was to belong to Jesus. Whatever it took to remain with Jesus, Simon Peter was willing to do, because he knew that this was the most important and precious relationship he could have.

And this is the essence of faith. It is a clinging on to our relationship with Jesus as what is most precious. Simon Peter would go on to fail Jesus. He would fail to accept the truths Jesus would tell him about himself, he would go on to deny even knowing Jesus when it was too scary to admit it. Yet, despite all his failings, Simon Peter had a longing and desire to hold on to Jesus and Jesus was never going to let go of him.

This is where he was very different to Judas Iscariot. Judas no longer wanted to belong to Jesus, despite all he had seen of Jesus. For whatever reason, Judas had given up on Jesus and was on the point of betraying him to the authorities. Judas was no longer on the side of Jesus, but of the devil and was now doing the devil's will.

Before anything else, true faith is a desire to cling to Jesus no matter what it takes. Belonging to him becomes the most precious thing you have because as Simon Peter says in chapter 6. "Lord, where shall we go, you have the words of eternal life."

As you listen today, does this represent your faith? Is clinging to Jesus the most important thing for you. Are you more like Simon Peter or Judas Iscariot? If you are not sure clinging to Jesus really matters, then perhaps you haven't truly grasped who he really is and what he can do for you?

Embrace Jesus not religious activity - vs. 10

So true faith needs to accept Jesus's service, it needs to cling to Jesus, but it also needs to embrace Jesus not religious activity.

Simon Peter when he is told he needs to accept Jesus washing his feet to be a part of him goes over the top and says: "Then not just my feet, but my hands and head as well!" If washing is what counts, then Simon Peter wants as much of it as he can get!

Jesus says that he only needs his feet washed, because he is already clean, although he goes on to say not all of them. What brings Simon cleansing is his desire to cling to Jesus, a desire that also now accepts that he needs to be served by Jesus. That is what makes Simon Peter clean and that is what can make us clean.

The one who was not clean was of course Judas Iscariot. Why? Because he was no longer clinging to Jesus, he had betrayed him.

It is our relationship with Jesus our commitment to him and our acceptance that we need to trust in his death on the cross that brings us salvation. We don't need any more than that.

If we are doing lots of other things, perhaps good or religious things in order to try and make sure that we are clean, that our place in God's kingdom is secure, then we are doing those things for the wrong reason.

If we are not confident in our salvation, then we need to look again at Jesus and hear him tell us that we are clean. That our salvation is secure. Not because we have done enough, but because he has done enough.

That does not mean that we should not be engaged in religious activity, but we must be doing it for the right motives. Not to secure our place with God, but because our place with God is secure.

An Example to Follow

Indeed, Jesus goes on to give Simon Peter and the other disciples a lesson on how they should live together as Christians based on what he has just done in washing their feet.

Jesus makes it clear to the disciples that if his main mission is illustrated by the sign of foot washing, an act of humble service. Then this is how we as Jesus's followers are to live our lives. This is the example we are to follow.

Now serving others humbly is not easy. We sometimes fail to do it because we are trying to hold on to our status. To serve others feels like it shows that we are lower than them. But when we remember that Jesus the ultimate Lord humbly served us, then we realise it means nothing of the sort.

Indeed, Jesus did this knowing his identity and place with God as the Father was secure. He had come from the Father and was going back to the Father. Nothing that people did to try and humiliate him could take that away from him.

We too can know our identity and place with God is secure, because of the love shown to us in Jesus Christ through death on the cross. It shows that nothing can separate us from the love of God. So we do not need to worry about losing face or status in serving others.

Rather let's worry not about our status, but how especially in these difficult times we can humbly serve one another and so live out the heart of the gospel.

Simon Peter did not know why Jesus was washing his feet. In the end however, he would come to see that it demonstrated the heart of the Christian message. God in Christ serves us, we need to accept and hold to that and in turn we need to live out that humble service ourselves.