



Peninsula City Church

The Easter Season

Foot Washing

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Foot Washing

Introduction

Q. Have you ever had someone wash your feet?

If someone were to ask you this question, how would you answer him or her? Why would you want to wash someone's feet anyway? I suppose a parent would wash their young child's feet, or nurse patients, but outside of that, there would not be many other reasons to wash someone's feet. However, the Bible does mention this practice for practical and then symbolic reasons. Let us look at these two reasons for washing someone's feet.

1. Practical reasons

Q. Why would anyone want to wash another person's feet?

Well, actually, in the Middle East in the time recorded in the Old and New Testaments the people wore sandals (instead of shoes as today), and so their feet got dusty and dirty. The roads were often dusty, muddy (unlike our made roads today) and the animals would have dropped their waste on the road. As people traveled from place to place, they would have stood in all of this dust, dirt, mud and waste dirtying their feet. Consequently, any washing of a person's feet would have been for practical and hygiene reasons. This would have been especially if one went into a tent, home, building or temple.

It would have also been refreshing to have one's feet washed with cool clean water.¹ This practice would have been a form of hospitality towards the guest who came to one's home or building. It has been pointed out that,

“In the case of ordinary people, the host furnished the water, and the guests washed their own feet, but in the richer houses, a slave did the washing.”²

This washing of the feet is mentioned in the following passages,

Abraham said to the strangers,

“Rest in the shade of this tree while water is brought to wash your feet” (Gen 18:4 NLT).

Lot said to the two angels,

“My lords,’ he said, ‘come to my home to wash your feet, and be my guests for the night. You may then get up early in the morning and be on your way again.’ ‘Oh no,’ they replied. ‘We’ll just spend the night out here in the city square’” (Gen 19:2 NLT).

Laban said to Abraham's servant,

“So the man went home with Laban, and Laban unloaded the camels, gave him straw for their bedding, fed them, and provided water for the man and the camel drivers to wash their feet” (Gen 24:32 NLT).

Joseph's servant,

“The manager then led the men into Joseph's palace. He gave them water to wash their feet and provided food for their donkeys” (Gen 43:24 NLT).

¹ “Washing of Feet.” <http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/W/washing-of-feet.html> (16th March 2016).

² “Washing of Feet.” <http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/W/washing-of-feet.html> (16th March 2016).

An old man washed the Levite's feet,

“So he took them home with him and fed the donkeys. After they had washed their feet, they ate and drank together” (Jud 19:21 NLT).

Abigail washed David's servant's feet,

“She bowed low to the ground and responded, ‘I, your servant, would be happy to marry David. I would even be willing to become a slave, washing the feet of his servants!’” (1 Sam 25:41 NLT).

So, it soon becomes obvious that this practice was part of the lifestyle and hospitality of this time. It was an important part of the social structure of society. It was also practical if you wanted to keep your tent, home, building or temple clean. This practice was recorded as continuing within the New Testament.

2. Symbolic reason

Q. What is the reason behind foot washing in the New Testament?

In the New Testament, although there are only four references to washing another's feet, this does not mean that this practice ceased. As the roads were not much better and the animals were still around, so peoples feet still needed to be washed. Out of the four references that follow, three are quite out of the ordinary for the standard of washing someone's feet. I will review Jesus' washing of His disciple's feet.

- The first of these references is Lk 7:36-50: This was when Simon a Pharisee neglected the basic hospitality to Jesus of washing His feet. While Luke records a woman washing His feet with her tears and then wiping them with her own hair, (see Luke 7:38,44).
- The next recorded event of foot washing is Jn 12:1-8: Here John recorded Mary is not washing Jesus' feet with water, anointing it with an expensive oil of Spikenard. She then proceeded to wipe it off with her own hair, (Jn 12:3).
- On the evening of Jesus' death, He washed His follower's feet, Jn 13:1-16: Jesus displayed what it meant to be a servant to those that He was leading, (Jn 13:4-5,12). He had said in Mk 10:45 “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”
- Finally, in 1 Timothy 5:10 Paul mentions some of the traits of a widow who is an honourable Christ-follower. One of these traits are that she wash the feet of the saints.

I would just like to briefly review John 13:1-16 and especially regarding Judas Iscariot and Peter. Jesus conversation regarding the washing of Peter's feet. What is amazing here in John's gospel is that Jesus washed the feet of the all His followers, even Judas Iscariot (as it records that he left after the meal), (Jn 13:2,29-30). Judas was corrupted by the devil and was about to betray Jesus, (Jn 13:2,21,27). If purity could have come through keeping external observances then having one's feet washed by Jesus would have to be it, but Judas was still internally impure. This is evident as Jesus said that,

¹⁰ “And all of you are clean but not every one of you.” ¹¹ For He knew who was to betray Him; that was why He said, ‘Not all of you are clean’” (Jn 13:10b-11 ESV).

Yet, Jesus was still willing to wash Judas' feet. The actual feet of His, traitor, and He could keep a sweet spirit about it all. Whoa, this is an amazing example of the enormous servant heart of Jesus. Jesus was single minded about doing the will of the Father, even if it meant washing the feet of Judas.

John also noted that Peter did not want Jesus to wash his feet. One thing that comes through here is that, Jesus was not washing Peter's feet for ritual purity. How do we know this is the case? Jesus pointed out to Peter that, purity comes from within a person and not by any external observances, (Jn 13:10). Peter trying to grasp what was happening, was talking to Jesus about the washing is with water, as a sign of ritual washing. In ceremonial washing, the body would be washed and the person became ritually clean.

Peter's denial of Jesus washing his feet showed that, he still did not understand what Jesus was doing. However, he was willing to grow in his understanding even if he was somewhat reactionary, (Jn 13:8-9). For example, Peter said,

⁸ "Peter said to Him, 'You shall never wash my feet.' Jesus answered him, 'If I do not wash you, you have no share with Me.' ⁹ Simon Peter said to Him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!'" (Jn 13:8-9 ESV).

Then Jesus reveals the power of the initial washing for salvation when He said,

"Jesus said to him, 'The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And all of you are clean'" (Jn 13:10 ESV).

Jesus was teaching them that, there is no need for a rewashing for salvation, but just to deal with the heart like washing the feet as one travels on the road of life.

Then Jesus asks all of them,

"Do you understand what I have done to you?" (Jn 13:12b ESV)

He then says that,

¹³ "You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you" (Jn 13:13-15 ESV).

What does Jesus mean by, "...you also ought to wash one another's feet"? Well, He tells His followers when He said,

¹⁶ "Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant (bondservant or love servant) is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent Him. ¹⁷ If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them" (Jn 13:16-17 ESV).

Therefore,

- It is all about serving others (even the Judas Iscariot's of life ouch), and keep a sweet spirit about it all.
- It is simply taking up your towel and bowl of water (so to speak), serving others as Jesus would, and then going on with life without the applause of others.
- It is following the example of Jesus as He displayed what servant leadership looks like, even though His followers did not understand Him at the time.
- When the followers of Jesus Christ were able to look back at what Jesus did and said, they were able to identify with His example of servant leadership.

Some concluding thoughts

So, coming back to the opening question,

Q. Have you ever had someone wash your feet?

You may have done this without even knowing it. Because you do know that, it is not the physical act of washing someone's feet that is the issue here (although you might practically need to do this for someone at some stage), it is serving. So, by following Jesus' example here we can learn that being a willing servant is the main issue. This heart motivation and practice need to be part of our lifestyle and hospitality.

If someone comes to your home or office etc., now, you might not physically wash his or her feet, but you may serve him or her a cold or hot drink. If it is cold, you may offer them a warm place or if it is, hot a cool place. This is part of being hospitable as people. However, this is only part of what can be learnt here, it is the attitude of being a servant that is of the utmost importance.

Remember that Jesus said that He as the Son of Man,

“...came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45 NLT).

Therefore, although washing other's feet may have had a practical purpose at one stage, today it has a different purpose. It can have a practical purpose of reminding us to be servants. However, it can also have a symbolic purpose of being a Christ-follower who has died to self and is alive to the needs of those around us. It has been said on this matter by Martin Luther King Jr., that,

“Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”³

³ Damazio, Frank. *Life Changing Leadership: Identifying and Developing Your Team's Full Potential*. (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2013), 119.