

John Lesson 15 Articles

As indicated in connection with the story of the Baptizer (John 1:27), touching feet was regarded as menial slave work and as such was primarily an assignment given to Gentile slaves and women.²² Students were responsible to rabbis or teachers to perform menial tasks of labor, but touching feet was clearly not expected. In a society that was very conscious of status symbols of shame and honor, such as the touching or washing of feet, was an extremely important matter. John the Baptizer had been unwilling to be categorized in the same context with Jesus, even as his lowest slave. He was viewed by the evangelist as an ideal model of a witness. But here the lowly slave was God's agent, the proclaimer of the key thesis to understanding the message of the Gospel, namely that Jesus is "the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world" (1:29).

But what is startling in this story is the vivid portrayal of the Messiah adopting a shameful/lowly posture in relation to his disciples. I know of no other example in the literature of the ancient world before the coming of Jesus where such a foot washing by a leader occurs.²³ The evangelist makes clear that Jesus intended that he should be viewed in the posture of such a slave by removing or "laying down" (*tithēsin*, the same verb is also used of Jesus laying down his life) his "outer clothing". Then he tied a towel around himself in the fashion of a slave and actually used *that towel* to wipe the feet of the disciples once he had washed them. The humbling or dishonoring symbolism is unmistakable.¹

Christ's words to Peter in v. 8 are important: "If I do not wash you, you have no part [communion] with Me" (NKJV). There is a difference between union and communion. Peter was in union with Christ as one of "His own" through faith, but sin can break our communion with the Lord. There is a difference between sonship and fellowship. Only as we allow Christ to cleanse us can we remain in fellowship with Him and enjoy His presence and power.

In v. 10, Christ makes an important distinction between washing and cleansing. The verse reads literally: "He that has been once-and-for-all washed all over does not need to do anything more than cleanse his feet." In Eastern lands, people used public baths; as they walked in the dusty streets, their feet became dirty. On arriving home, they did not need another bath; they needed only to wash their feet. So it is with the believer. When we are saved, we are washed all over (1 Cor. 6:9–11; Titus 3:5–6); when we confess our daily sins to the Lord, we have our feet washed and our "walk" is cleansed (1 John 1:7–9).

When the Jewish priests were ordained, they were washed all over (Ex. 29:4), which pictures our once-for-all cleansing; but God also provided the laver (Ex. 30:17–21) for them to use in the daily washing of their hands and feet. Today, Christ is cleansing His church through the water of the Word (Eph. 5:25–26; John 15:3). As we daily read the Word, allow the Spirit to search our hearts (Heb. 4:12), and then confess our sins, we keep our feet clean and walk in the light. (See Ps. 119:9.) It is this daily cleansing that keeps the believer in communion with Christ. The lesson here has nothing to do with "getting" or "losing" one's salvation. It is strictly a matter of communion, fellowship with Christ. Many believers make the same mistake Peter made (v. 9); they want to be saved (washed) all over again when all they need is to have their feet washed.²

²² See *Str-B* 1.121; *Mekhilta* on Exod 21:2; *Kethub* 96 a.

²³ A familiar rabbinic story is told in *Pe'a* 1.15c.14 of Rabbi Ishmael, whose mother sought to honor him by washing his feet when he arrived home from the synagogue. After he refused her because he viewed her effort as dishonoring to her and ultimately to him, she sought a censure against him from the rabbinic court for his refusal to allow her to honor him. This story provides some insight into the perspectives of shame and honor in Judaism. For further information see *Str-B* 1.707.

¹ Borchert, G. L. (2002). *John 12–21* (Vol. 25B, pp. 79–80). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

NKJV *The New King James Version*

² Wiersbe, W. W. (1992). *Wiersbe's expository outlines on the New Testament* (pp. 246–247). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.