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FEET-WASHING AS A LESSON IN HUMILITY

"Ye also ought to wash one another's feet." – John 13:14.

WE REMEMBER the occasion on which our Lord washed the feet of His disciples. The Lord and His twelve Apostles had met in the upper room to commemorate the Passover Supper. This feast was followed by the inauguration of the Memorial Supper, the bread and wine of which represented the body and the blood of our Lord Jesus. The disciples, full of the enthusiasm which had been incited for some days previous, were all at a loss to understand the sadness of our Lord Jesus. While He was saying, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death" (Matt. 26:38) and desiring that His baptism might be accomplished, they were inclined to think that He was taking a pessimistic view of matters.

During the five preceding days the disciples had witnessed the feast in the house of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, the breaking of the alabaster box of ointment, the riding on the ass, and the spreading of palm branches for the little animal to walk on, and the demonstration of the people, who had cried, "Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest!" (Matt. 21:9.) They had heard the Pharisees ask Jesus to put a stop to this demonstration. But He had said to them that if these people should hold their peace the very stones would cry out. (Luke 19:40.) To fulfil the [R5090 : page 274] prophecy (Zech. 9:9) there must be a *shout*, and there was a shout.

We remember that the little company went to the Temple, that the whole city was in commotion, that the rulers were impressed, and that they were afraid of the people. We remember that Jesus had gone into the Temple and had driven out those who sold merchandise; that when the Pharisees, the Sadducees and others tried to make Jesus appear confused, He had wisely turned all their arguments upon themselves;

and that they dared not ask Him any more questions, for by so doing they would only make a bad matter worse.

From all these things it must have seemed to the Apostles that they were on the eve of attaining great prominence and that Jesus would be exalted. Therefore, they could not understand His attitude of sorrow. As an evidence, we have the fact that James and John went to Jesus and asked about the place they might occupy in the Kingdom. Could they be *next to Him*? There was no doubt in their minds that the Kingdom was near. They specially loved Him and would like to have the [R5091 : page 274] favor of being near Him. Others might not care so much where they were placed, but James and John would like to be *close to the Master*.

These were the thoughts uppermost in their minds. As a result, when they came to the upper room, they had not the humility of mind to take thought of serving. No doubt it was the custom of the Jews to have a *servant* to minister to the comfort of the guests. But there was no servant here and not one of them had the humility of mind to offer to be the servant. Apparently they not only did not have the disposition to serve one another, but they did not desire to wash even the Master's feet.

SELFISHNESS EVEN IN LOVE

Since it is difficult for us to gage our own hearts thoroughly, we should use great charity in measuring the hearts and intentions of others, and should err on the side of too great sympathy and leniency rather than on that of too strong condemnation. Doubtless had the Apostles been asked as to their motives and conduct, they would have denied that these were selfish, and would have spoken only of their zeal for the Lord and their desire to be near Him. This illustrates to us what the Scriptures declare, that the human heart is exceedingly deceitful, and that it requires careful scrutiny, lest under the cloak of good motives, it harbor qualities which, if recognized, it would spurn.

Apparently our Lord let the matter go to its full limit to see whether or not any of His followers would improve the opportunity to make himself servant of all. He waited until supper was being served (not ended as in our common Version); then, arising from the table, He laid aside His mantle and got a basin and a towel. Then, girding up His garments to keep them from getting into the water, He proceeded to wash their feet.

We can well imagine the consternation of the Apostles as they watched the procedure, and then saw the Lord go from the feet of one to those of another, as they protruded from the couches on which the Apostles reclined. The method of feet-washing at that time was different from that of today. The water was poured from a pitcher in a small stream upon the feet, which were washed and rinsed. The basin was merely a receptacle for receiving the soiled water.

OUR LORD'S ACT A DEEP SPIRITUAL LESSON

This act was a pointed reproof for their neglect to wash *His* feet and *one another's*. They were all silent until He came to St. Peter. When our Lord paused before him, St. Peter said, "Thou shalt never wash my feet!" St. Peter had too much reverence to wish the Lord to be his servant. He had as a natural trait, more than had some of the others, that courage, or boldness, which led him to speak out. But the Lord said to him, "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with Me." (John 13:8.) St. Peter did not understand how this washing would give him a part with the Lord, but he said eagerly, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head," if this gives me a more particular part with You. The Lord answered him, "He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit." I am doing all that is necessary. What I am doing you do not understand now, but you shall understand hereafter. – See verses 7-10.

In all this the Lord was giving a deep spiritual lesson – that no one is naturally fit for the Kingdom. Each one needs to be washed, to be cleansed, before he can be a joint-sufferer, before he can be a joint-

heir. He must be a joint-sacrificer in order to become a member of The Christ. Jesus said to His disciples, You have witnessed My humility in this matter, and now I want to tell you that you ought to have this attitude toward one another. You should have been careful for even the humblest one in your number. Whether or not it was by washing My feet and those of all the others, you should have done whatever was necessary for the refreshment of the company.

THE ACT NOT THE INSTITUTION OF A CEREMONY

We are to remember that things were different then from what they are today. Because of the wearing of sandals, the feet would be considerably soiled even after only a short journey and would, therefore, need refreshing. It was the custom that the servant should come forth and make the guests comfortable – not to the inconvenience of the traveler, but to his further comfort. This was a menial service, which afforded Jesus the opportunity to impress upon His Apostles the lesson of the necessity of humility in all the members of the Body of Christ.

We do not get a lesson of the institution of a formal ceremony. It was only a case of *necessity*, of which the Lord took advantage to give a lesson of humility. No such need exists with us today. Our streets are paved and we wear shoes that are closely laced and are sufficient protection. So there is no necessity to wash each other's feet, at a public gathering, to have a public exhibition of feet-washing.

The incident affords a lesson in humility to us as well as it afforded one to the Apostles. We should be glad to do any service, even to the humblest of the members of Christ, in whatever way the opportunity may come. There is no suggestion in the Scriptures that feet-washing was ever done as a ceremony. We have an intimation, however, that feet-washing was a custom in Palestine. In I Tim. 5:9-16, we read that if a widowed sister had washed the saints' feet, meaning that if she had shown such a disposition, St. Paul would

advocate a special care for such a sister in need; for she had manifested a loyal and true spirit.

There are some very good Christian people who have adopted feet-washing as a religious custom. We are not to berate them unnecessarily for following their consciences. Rather we should say to them that so long as they think they are doing the Lord's will, they are right to follow the custom; but that the Scriptures relate only this one case where the feet-washing was done in public, and it was very unlikely, therefore, that it was ever done in public by the Church except on this occasion. As the [R5091 : page 275] commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," has a deeper meaning than that one shall not take the life of another, so this washing of feet has a deeper meaning. Throughout His ministry Jesus indicated the deeper thought by His treatment of others; He lightened the burden and happified the condition of those with whom He came in contact. So we should do all in our power for the consecrated ones, members of Christ's Body.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO ONE ANOTHER

This lesson suggests that the members of Christ's Body should have a mutual watch-care over one another's welfare; to keep each other pure, holy, clean and to assist one another in overcoming the trials, temptations and besetments of this present evil world, arising from the three sources of temptation – the world, the flesh and the Devil. Only as we cultivate the various graces of the Spirit – meekness, gentleness, patience, brotherly-kindness, love – can we hope to be specially helpful to others in putting on these adornments of character and purities of life, and in getting rid of the defilements of the world and of the flesh.

It requires peculiar qualifications to enable us to assist each other in this respect. Before we can help others to cleanse their way of life in every little particular, so that every thought, word and deed shall be brought into subjection to the Divine will, it is necessary that we have experience along the same lines. Only as we cultivate purity of

thought, word and deed in our own lives, only as we put on the various graces of the Spirit, can we wash the feet of the saints.

Many who would reject well-meant criticism of conduct, who would resent well-meant offers of assistance to a higher standard of character, as interferences with their private business, would be very amenable to the influence of the same person if he approached them with such evidences of true devotion and loving interest as would be indicated by the performance of some menial act. It is the sympathetic ones who are most successful in helping the various members of the Body of Christ out of the besetments and difficulties incident to the following of the Lord in the present time. Oh, let us study and strive and pray that we may be very successful in obeying the Master's injunction, "Ye also ought to wash one another's feet!"

How many opportunities we have for comforting, refreshing, consoling and assisting one another in some of the humblest affairs of daily living or in respect to some of the unpleasant duties, experiences or trials of life! By love we are to serve one another, but not as a mere formality. Any service done or attempted to be done in love, with the desire to do good to one of the Lord's people, has, we may be sure, the approval of the Head of the Church.

Let us lose no opportunities of this kind; let us remember the Master's example. Let us not merely assume the guise of humility, but let us actually have that grace of character which will enable us to do kindnesses and service to all with whom we come in contact. Then we shall all the more enjoy this privilege as we find the needy ones to be members of the Body of Christ – The Christ.

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