

THE WASHING OF FEET, Watchman Nee

“But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.” John 4:14

“He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.” John 7:38

- 13:1 Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end.
- 13:2 And supper being ended, the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him;
- 13:3 Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God, and went to God;
- 13:4 He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself.
- 13:5 After that he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded.
- 13:6 Then cometh he to Simon Peter: and Peter saith unto him, Lord, dost thou wash my feet?
- 13:7 Jesus answered and said unto him, What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter.
- 13:8 Peter saith unto him, Thou shalt never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me.
- 13:9 Simon Peter saith unto him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.
- 13:10 Jesus saith to him, He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all.
- 13:11 For he knew who should betray him; therefore said he, Ye are not all clean.
- 13:12 So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you?
- 13:13 Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am.
- 13:14 If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet.

In John's Gospel frequent reference is made to "water" as expressing life. In John 4:14 we are told that when a thirsty soul comes to Christ for satisfaction, he is offered water to drink -- and no mere draught of water: "Whosoever shall drink of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up unto eternal life." In 7:38 we read: "He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water." When we come to chapter 13 we find a further reference to water -- not now welling up within to the ceaseless quenching of thirst; not now flowing out in lifegiving streams to others; but bathing feet that have grown weary walking along the dusty roads.

A superficial reading of these Scriptures might lead us to the conclusion that we could easily dispense with this third function of water. Having solved the problem of our personal satisfaction by the living water welling up within, and having solved the problem of fruitfulness in service by the living water flowing out to those around, what further need have we?

Stop and think for a moment. What does your own experience tell you? Do these two cover all your need? Have you not known times when, despite the fulness of spiritual life provided, you still feel

lifeless? You truly believe in the abundance of the life-giving waters; but there is no evidence of this fulness of life in your gait; you are dragging your feet wearily along the way. What do you lack? You lack that of which John writes in this 13th chapter of his Gospel.

Note that He introduces the washing of feet with this statement: "Jesus knowing that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end." The reason given for this ministry to His disciples was not their sinfulness but His love for them. And this was not an initial expression of love; it was an expression of His love toward them when He was about to leave them. He had loved them all along, and all along He had given them constant evidence of His love; but before He was parted from them He sought to tell them in this act that "having loved his own that were in the world, he loved them unto the end." The washing of the disciples' feet was not a matter of passing moment; it is of lasting significance, for it expresses the love that loves "unto the end." If the saints are to finish their course they will need to know the refreshment that comes by having their feet washed and they will need in turn to minister this refreshment to their fellow-pilgrims.

Peter, in his usual impetuous manner, protested when the Lord wanted to wash his feet, and his reluctance was not overcome when the Lord offered this explanation: "What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt understand hereafter." Peter's renewed protest was met with a stronger word: "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me." His reaction to this further word was again characteristic: "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head." Peter's remark revealed his misconception of the Lord's act; but it was swiftly corrected. "Jesus saith to him, He that is bathed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all. For he knew who should betray him."

That the washing of feet does not relate to the sin question is perfectly clear. Peter was clean, the Lord said. He also said that because Peter was clean he did not require to have his whole body washed; but He stated with equal clarity that Peter did require to have his feet washed. This was not a luxury; it was a necessity. So necessary was it, that if Peter refused this ministration from the Lord, it would prove a barrier to fellowship. And what loss that would mean!

It will help us to recall that when this incident took place the Jews wore sandals, which gave little protection from the dust of the roads; it was therefore customary after a journey to bathe the feet. But what is stressed here is the positive rather than the negative: renewal rather than removal of defilement. When our Lord washed the disciples' feet He did not censure them for having contracted defilement by the way, nor did He exhort them to walk more carefully. For dust to attach to the feet of the traveler as he walked the dusty roads was inevitable; therefore it was not a rebuke that was called for, but the application of a little water to the soiled and weary feet. In His love the Lord rendered this service to His disciples.

As long as citizens of heaven are pilgrims in this world, even while they press on their way in accordance with the purpose of God, they have to tread the earthly roads, and their feet are bound to bear traces of earth. Even when they have kept themselves uncorrupted from the world, its dust attaching to their feet causes discomfort and fatigue.

Where there is undealt-with sin, the enemy has ground for attack; but death, as well as sin, exposes us to his assaults. For this reason we need to be maintained in constant freshness of life as well as in constant freedom from defilement. Even when we are careful to avoid all that would defile, there are times when, quite unaccountably, we lack zest to press on. The trouble is, the earth-touch has taken toll of us. We have grown foot-sore

with the roughness and dust of the road and this eventually has sapped our strength. We have life; we received that by new birth; but life has lost its freshness and we need reviving. It is not the whole body that needs bathing; but the feet need it; and they need it repeatedly; for the end of the road is not reached in a day. When we begin to lose our vitality as we travel along the road, we are apt to feel there is something wrong with the whole body; but when the feet have been bathed the whole body is strangely rested. Very often our lack of spiritual vitality can be swiftly solved by the spiritual equivalent of bathing the feet.

When Christ had ministered in this way to His disciples He said: "Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me, Master, and, Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Master, have washed your feet, ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye also should do as I have done to you." A responsibility rests upon us to obey this command of the Lord. He has set us an example which He requires us to follow.

Do you know what it is to feel utterly lacking in spiritual energy, to weak to go on? You wonder what has gone wrong; but try as you may, you cannot locate the trouble. You are not conscious of having done anything to grieve the Lord; you are just overwhelmingly conscious that you don't know how to drag your feet any further. You are aware of the grave danger of being negative; but what can you do? What about going to see Brother A.? Perhaps he can help. You go. He offers what counsel he has to give; but while you listen to a long dissertation on the Scriptures, you feel that the little vitality you have left is being drained. You leave feeling worse than before. Whatever can be wrong? Perhaps Brother B. would understand your plight and give some practical aid. You seek him out. He suggests a time of prayer together. That sounds helpful; but the longer he prays -- and his prayer is very, very long -- the more your heart sinks. You leave his home wondering what hope there is. Quite unexpectedly you meet Brother C. He does not preach to you; he does not pray with you; you just find yourself engaged in a simple conversation that takes its natural course without any defined aim on his part or yours; and almost imperceptibly the impossible thing happens -- you are revitalized. You can go on, and you can go on with a spring in your step and a song in your heart. That brother, all unconsciously, ministered life to you: he washed the feet that were travel-stained and sore. The washing of feet is not only a service performed by the Lord Himself; it is a ministry committed by Him to the Church. And it is not necessarily a clearly defined institution that is deliberately observed. It is often an unconscious mutual ministration, as when one believer meets another in the Lord and the two converse spontaneously; or when, after a day's work in school or office or factory you are too weary to read the Word or pray, but you attend a weekday church gathering and as you meet some of your fellow-saints you are strangely refreshed. Definable or indefinable, something transpires, and you can go on again with renewed vigor.

In the intercourse of the saints this feet-washing is of great importance. We are all in frequent need of a ministration of life, and this ought to be mutual: "Ye also ought to wash one another's feet." If the children of God arrive at any of their weekly meetings in a state of spiritual weakness and leave as they arrive, there is something wrong with that meeting. It should be our serious business to bring life into each gathering; otherwise the atmosphere will be heavy, and any brothers and sisters who may be finding it hard to go on will fail to receive the renewal they sorely need.

Once a brother attended the regular meeting for the preaching of the Word. He felt so dull and unresponsive that he wondered if he had sinned against the Lord; but he could get no registration of sin. He tried to discover what had happened to him, but he sought in vain for an explanation. He attempted to throw off the lethargy that seemed to have settled upon him; but it was no good. Presently a brother prayed, and the lethargy was gone. He had been impotent to throw it off; but the freshness of life

ministered to him through that brother's prayer instantly dispelled the death that had begun to sap his vitality.

If we drift into the church meetings without any sense of responsibility toward the needy children of God who through their constant contact with the world have lost something of their spiritual freshness, we shall be ignoring the Lord's injunction to wash one another's feet. This is one of the most important services we can render to the saints. It does not necessarily involve any outward activity; but it does at least demand that we roll our burdens on the Lord lest we come into the meetings weighed down by our personal concerns and so create a heavy atmosphere that makes it difficult for others to find the refreshment they need. At times, with all our desire to serve, we may be unable to recover our usual buoyancy; then we can let others wash our feet. This feet-washing must never deteriorate into a one-sided ministry, for the Lord purposed that it be a mutual matter. "Wash one another's feet," He said.

If the greater proportion of believers attend the meetings in a passive way, or if their only hope is to get something for themselves, the burden imposed upon the few is too heavy and the interflow of life is hindered. Whether or not a meeting has much value for the Lord and for His saints will depend on the proportion of those present who have a positive desire to minister life. This is the responsibility of every single one who possesses the life of the Lord. No matter what the stage of maturity, provided the spirit of each one is clear, there will be a free interflow of life between the members of the company that will bring a quickening to the whole. The churches suffer serious loss through passivity on the part of many of its members. It is true that we can each one approach the Lord individually, and in so doing we are greatly ministered to; but there is something of mutual ministration that the Head of the Church committed to His members when He said: "If I, then, the Lord and the Master, have washed your feet, ye also ought to wash one another's feet." We cannot with impunity ignore our responsibility to minister life to our fellow-members; nor can we with impunity disregard our own need to receive the quickening that only they can minister to us. This places us all under a solemn obligation to abide in the Lord so that we may be kept perennially fresh. If today we have had no now experience of the Lord, those who touch us will miss the spiritual quickening they need. Many of the Lord's children keep harping on experiences of by-gone years. Oh, the pathos of it! They are in a state of stagnation and are consequently unable to render the valuable service committed to them by the Lord.

A certain sister who over the years had learned to draw daily on the life of Christ, was always a source of quickening to others. If you felt spiritually jaded, you just needed to call on her and sit down in her company for a little time. You did not need to do anything, nor did she. You simply sat there for awhile, and the weariness vanished. You revived because she was in constant close communion with the Lord. It was because of the freshness of her fellowship with Him that others met Him afresh when they met her.

Brothers and Sisters, let us not covet the utterance of others; let us not covet their extensive Bible knowledge; but let us covet to be ministers of life to the saints. Provided we maintain close communion with the Head of the Body, we shall be able to minister His life to the other members. In a prayer-meeting it not infrequently happens that a young believer prays and immediately there is a release of life. His knowledge is limited and his utterance imperfect, but as soon as he prays he lifts the whole meeting. On the other hand, many an older Christian, despite years of accumulated Bible knowledge and perfected utterance, makes no impact on the meeting when he prays. The young Christian has freshly met the Lord; the older Christian has not. Fresh life is communicated to other members of the Body when we are in fresh touch with our living Head.

While it is right that we covet to wash the feet of the saints, let us not fail to realize that, because this is a mutual ministry in the Church, we cannot prosper if we always want to minister and are never prepared to be ministered to. The whole Church is built up through the mutual ministration of all the members. We must always be eager to serve the children of God; but we must always be ready to be served by them too. This calls for the grace of humility.

In Acts 18:4, we read that Paul "reasoned in the synagogue every sabbath and persuaded Jews and Greeks." The sequel is beautiful: "But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul was constrained by the word, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ." The arrival of Silas and Timothy brought an influx of life to Paul and with it a fresh impetus to preach the Word. Silas and Timothy did not minister to Paul in any spectacular way; but the mere arrival of these two fellow-saints so strengthened the Apostle that with added vehemence he was able to preach Christ.

If we are to minister Christ to others, we must fulfill the required condition: we must let His Cross operate continually to release His life in and through us; otherwise what we minister will reach the soul only, not the spirit. It is as we abide in freshness of fellowship with Him that we convey freshness of life to those with whom we come in contact. Life is conveyed spontaneously, not by strenuous effort. True, the washing of feet is with water; but we do not need to pump the water up laboriously; it comes to us freely as we live in Him Who is the Water of Life. Let us then see to it that we abide continually in Him.