

# THE TOWEL WEARERS

by Ray C. Stedman

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These next few weeks we will be studying the passage known as *The Upper Room Discourse* in the Gospel of John, Chapters 13 through 17. This passage takes us into the intimate thoughts of Jesus just before the crucifixion. Some have called this the holy of holies of Scripture. That is, if you think of Scripture as a temple, then this is the sanctuary, in which you come into the very presence of God himself. By means of his words to his disciples, we are permitted here to enter into the thinking and emotions of Jesus just before his own crucifixion. Within hours of this event the Lord was hanging upon a cross. In less than twenty-four hours he was dead and buried. These therefore constitute the last words of Jesus before his own death.

The passage begins, as you know, with a parable in action. Rather than a discourse or a message, it begins with the deeds of Jesus, the acts of Jesus, in the washing of the disciples' feet. And in that remarkable event, simple as it was, and yet strange in many ways, the Apostle John sees some very deep and remarkable meaning. There are two movements which John sees in this event, and he gathers them up in the preface to this account. John sees it first as the evidence and the demonstration of the unchanging love of Jesus for his disciples. He says,

**Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. {John 13:1 RSV}**

Please don't be confused, as some have been, by the opening words, "before the feast of the Passover." This has presented a problem to some who have struggled with the chronology of this event and have felt that these words date the feast of the Lord's supper as taking place before the feast of the Passover. That would be contrary to what the other Gospels record. But John is not linking this phrase with the subsequent event of the washing of the disciples' feet. He is referring back to the time when Jesus discovered that his hour had come.

Jesus discovered that information in an event recorded in the twelfth chapter -- the incident involving the Greeks who came and asked to see him. When report was brought to Jesus that certain Gentiles were asking for him, this seemed to indicate to him that it was the signal for the beginning of the dramatic denouement of his ministry, that it was now drawing rapidly to an end. And it was then that Jesus knew that "his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father." In fact, in Chapter 12 John says as much. When Philip and Andrew told Jesus that the Greeks had come and wished to see him, he answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified," {John 12:23 RSV}. And all John is saying here is that, from that moment on, Jesus understood that the time had come, that the hour had struck, that he now was to make his exodus from the world by means of death and resurrection. He always had known what the events would be, but he did not know the time they would come. But now he knows.

And from that moment on he remains still considerate and compassionate and thoughtful about his own disciples. That struck John. He is amazed by the fact that Jesus is not thinking of himself even though he knows that this is the dramatic hour toward which he has been living. Rather, his thoughts are still upon his own disciples. He teaches them and manifests love and compassion and concern for them unto the end. So that is the first thing which John sees is wrapped up in this remarkable scene of the washing of the disciples' feet. Jesus is still teaching his disciples.

The second movement concerns Judas. John sees in the act of footwashing a demonstration of the truth which is in Jesus, of the remarkable passion which strips away all pretense and hypocrisy and reveals things exactly the way they are. And so, in Verse 2, he says, "And during supper..." Now the Passover has come, and Jesus is meeting with his disciples to eat the Passover meal together:

**And during supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. {John 13:2-4 RSV}**

In this dramatic act of washing his disciples' feet, Jesus stooping to wash the feet of Judas as well as those of the other disciples, John sees a manifestation of that honesty of God, that reality of God which exposes all hypocrisy, and by means of such revelation seeks to lay hold of the traitor's heart and show him what is happening to him. Jesus is moved to do this, John says, by an awareness of his own authority. All things were given into his hands by the Father; he knew that. He knew who he was, knew he had come from God, knew he was going to God. And, moved by this sense of his own identity and authority, he begins to expose, by direct words to him, what Judas was doing and where he was headed. All this John sees as intertwined together in this remarkable scene: The commitment of love which taught to the end, and the passion of truth which fought to the end for the deliverance of Judas.

Following this is the account of the footwashing itself. John tells us that Jesus rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel.

**Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded. {John 13:5 RSV}**

There can be little doubt that here Jesus is deliberately working out a parable for the instruction of his disciples. He is dramatizing for them the truth of his own ministry, of his own redemptive mercy. He is showing them by this means what he had come into the world to do. You can trace the parallel in the events which John records:

First, Jesus "rose from supper," just as he had previously risen from his throne of glory.

Then he "laid aside his garments." Paul tells us that he laid aside his glory when he came into the world in the incarnate state. He laid aside the exercise of his own deity. He did not come to act as God; he came to act as man indwelt by God.

And he "girded himself with a towel," just as Paul also records that he "took the form of a servant," and "humbled himself and became obedient unto death," {Phil 2:7-8}. So here he humbles himself, taking the role of a slave, girding himself with a towel.

"Then he poured water into a basin," just as in a few hours he was to pour out his own blood in death, the blood which would be for the cleansing of human defilement, of human guilt of every kind and source. So he pours water into the basin as a picture of that.

Then he "began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded," picturing the very act of applying the cleansing of his own blood to human lives. And if you skip to Verse 12 you have the end of the parable. "When he had washed their feet, and taken his garments," he "resumed his place," just as the writer of Hebrews records for us that "When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high," {Heb 1:3 RSV}. Thus you have this remarkable, beautiful parable worked out for us, teaching us the meaning of his whole ministry.

In the events which immediately follow, Peter is brought into the picture. Moving around the circle of disciples, our Lord came at last to Peter, who refused to let him wash his feet:

**Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part [with] me." {John 13:8 RSV}**

I know that the Revised Standard Version uses the phrase, "in me," but I cannot understand why the translators have done that. The Greek text clearly and unmistakably says "with me." This is a very important distinction, as we will see in a moment. But in this incident of Peter's refusal to be washed by Jesus you have

a remarkable picture of the sinful pride of human beings who reject the cleansing ministry of Jesus.

Here again you have a picture of the need which exists in humanity for the cleansing which Jesus offers. Peter's actions ostensibly were prompted by humility. You can see the incredulity on his face when Jesus approaches him, and he protests, "Lord, you'll never do this to me!" It sounds as though this is a humble statement, reflecting the fact that Peter is humiliated that Jesus should ever take such a low position as to wash his feet.

At first glance it does appear as though Peter's expostulation arises out of his own sense of inadequacy and unworthiness before Jesus. But when you look a bit closer you can see that it is really the expression of intense personal pride. Peter is offended by Jesus' actions, because he knew that if he were in the same place, if he were an instructor, a teacher, and a Lord, he would never consider stooping to wash someone's feet. This would be beneath him. So Peter is offended. This is a rebuke to his own self-sufficiency. He doesn't want Jesus to wash his feet. He would be quite content to wash Jesus' feet, but it is an affront to his own sense of independence that Jesus should ever do anything for him, just as, later on, Peter offers to lay down his life for Jesus; he doesn't want Jesus to lay down his life for him.

What a revelation this is of the sinful pride of our own hearts which oftentimes cloaks itself with a guise of humility, but in which we are really insisting upon our own self-dependence, self-sufficiency. We do not want to admit to anybody that we are in need of anything. That is what Peter is doing here. He doesn't want to admit to Jesus that he requires this cleansing. He doesn't want to acknowledge his need of being washed, and, especially, of letting Jesus do this menial act for him. It humiliates him. And so he stands as an example of the pride in our own hearts which resists the ministry of Jesus to us.

One of the remarkable things about the gospel is that it is always bringing us down to the lowest point. We must stand in utter humiliation and abjectness in order for God to minister to us. All human pride must be brought low before him, before we can receive what God wants to give us from his hand. And that is where we struggle, isn't it? We don't like that. We don't like to be delivered to a place where we ourselves have nothing to offer. We want to add something. Peter is such a clear picture of this.

Then when Jesus explains to him, "If I do not wash you, you can have no part with me," Peter immediately capitulates, and flops clear over to the other extreme:

**Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"  
{John 13:9 RSV}**

"Lord, if that's the case, then by all means -- not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" In other words, he asked for a bath. Jesus had said earlier, "What I do now you don't understand." Peter proved in just a moment or two that he didn't understand what was happening. So Jesus corrects him again:

**Jesus said to him, "He who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but he is clean all over;" {John 13:10a RSV}**

And in those words he gives us a beautiful explanation of the process of salvation. It begins with a bath. That initial coming to Christ, in which we take the place of bankruptcy before him, coming without any vestige of our own righteousness to offer, and allowing him to cleanse us, is likened to a bath in which we are washed all over, completely, from head to foot. Jesus of course is alluding to a very common social practice in those days. It was the custom to take a bath before you went out to a meal. But in walking through the dirty streets of the city with sandals on, your feet would be defiled. And so when you arrived as a guest, a servant would wash your feet. But you would not need to repeat the bath.

So Jesus is saying, "When you first come to me, you are bathed, you are clean all over." This is what the Bible calls "justification by faith." It is a washing away of all the guilt, all the defilement, and all the evil and sin of the entire life -- past, present, and future. But as you walk through life, Jesus knows, there will be defilement contracted in the feet, in the walk, and that needs to be washed away. Thus he teaches us that not only do we need that initial never-to-be-repeated cleansing, which washes us as a bath; but we need also the

many-times-repeated experience of forgiveness, of coming to Christ for the cleansing away of the defilement of our walk, and being forgiven again and again and again, over and over again. It is this which determines that we have a part with him.

In other words, the enjoyment of our relationship with Christ is lost when we are temporarily defiled by wrongdoing, by guilt and by sin, by attitudes which are wrong in our life. We lose the enjoyment of our relationship with him. His attitude toward us doesn't change, but our attitude toward him does. That is why we are taught all through the Scriptures, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness," {1 Jn 1:9 KJV}. And the moment we do so we are renewed, i.e., that original cleansing is renewed to us, and we feel that cleansing once again -- the washing, the restoration, the renewing of our spirits, the lifting up of the vitality of our spiritual lives -- and we go on again, restored. Every believer has experienced this, but Jesus makes it clear to Peter.

And Peter's error is still being repeated today. There are those who, like him, refuse to have Jesus wash their feet. They are rejecting the indispensable requisite for enjoying their relationship with Christ. When people refuse to let Jesus wash their feet, as he said, they lose that sense of partnership with him.

On the other hand, there are those who, like Peter, feel that they need a bath all over again when they sin, that they have lost their salvation and that somehow they have to start all over in their Christian experience. Every now and then I run into people who are laboring under that delusion, who think that they need to be born, not only again, but again and again and again, as though the Holy Spirit had stuttered when he said, "regeneration," and had made it, "re-re-re-re-regeneration!" But Jesus teaches us by this whole process that only one bath is needed. This is reflected in the truth of baptism. You are baptized once, as the initial act. But the Lord's Supper reflects the washing of the feet, the need for the cleansing again and again through life from the defilement and the guilt of sin.

In the closing portion of this section of the passage, through Verse 20, our Lord explains what he has done, and you see here the example of Jesus standing contrast to that of Judas. Let's look first at Verses 12-17:

**When he had washed their feet, and taken his garments, and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them." {John 13:12-17 RSV}**

In those words Jesus is explaining the meaning of what he is doing. He begins again with his own authority. "You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right. I am your teacher, I am your Lord -- your teacher, with the right to instruct you; your Lord, with the right to command you." He acknowledges his own claims before them, asserts that he has this right in their lives. But his argument is, "If I, then, with this acknowledged position of authority in your lives, have washed your feet, then you also are to wash one another's feet."

Now, what does he mean when he says that we ought to wash one another's feet? Some Christians have taken this very literally and have thought that our Lord was here instituting another sacrament, along with baptism and the Lord's Supper. And you will occasionally find groups of Christians who, very sincerely, have what they call "foot-washing services," when they wash one another's feet. I attended one of these services on one occasion, and I noted that those who came were very careful to wash their own feet beforehand. They would never have thought of coming with dirty feet to a footwashing service! But Jesus washed the dirty feet of his disciples, without any opportunity for preparation on their part. He took the role of the servant to that degree.

No, Jesus is not giving us another sacrament to follow here, not another mere ceremony to go through, which really is meaningless because it doesn't reflect what was originally in view. But what he means is that just as we need the cleansing and forgiveness of our Lord in order to maintain the sense of unity and refreshment of spirit in our Christian life, so we need to forgive one another, to extend to one another free forgiveness for guilt and for the injury that we may do to one another. We are to be, in the words of Paul, "tenderhearted,

forgiving one another, even as God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven us," {cf, Eph 4:32 KJV}. This is what Jesus taught us in the Lord's Prayer, isn't? "Forgive us our trespasses, even as we forgive those who have trespassed against us," {cf, Matt 6:12}. He is exhorting Christians to forgive each other, and his authority to do so is based upon his own example.

He knows that it is difficult, sometimes, to forgive, that the flesh within cries out for revenge. We want somebody to pay for what they have done to us. We want to extract some kind of return for the injury. And oftentimes we love the feeling of carrying a grudge, or of resisting the overtures of the other person. We like the feeling of telling them off, giving them a piece of our mind, ripping into them. But Jesus says that when we are doing that, we are doing what he would not do. We are asserting our prerogatives, we are demanding our rights, we are insisting upon the privilege and status that we feel we have before others. And we are forgetting that our Lord and Master humbled himself, though he was rightfully our Teacher and our Lord, rightfully the Lord of Glory, the One with every right to the worship of men. Nevertheless he laid it all aside, did not demand it, did not seek it, did not insist upon it, and washed the feet of his own disciples. And so he says that we must do the same for one another.

No Christian has any right to sit in self-righteous judgment upon another. We may bring them, as we are exhorted to do, under the searching light of the Word of God. We may, out of concern and compassion for their welfare, expose to them what they are doing, as Jesus does here with his disciples. But in no sense are we to do so with self-righteousness, with the suggestion that we would never do a thing like that. Nor are we to demand that they first apologize before we forgive, or that they in some way repay us, or straighten out what they have done, before we extend to them a free and open acceptance and forgiveness. So when we resist this kind of ministry, when we don't want to forgive, or we don't want somebody to come and seek to wash our feet with the Word, we are doing what Peter did, refusing to following the admonition of our Lord:

**Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.  
{John 13:16-17 RSV}**

I remember that Dr. H. A. Ironside pointed out, though, how wise it is, when you go to another to wash his feet, or when another comes to you to wash your feet, that concern be exercised as to the temperature of the water! Some go with boiling hot water. They are so angry, so upset, so distracted by what has happened, and so mad about it, that they come to the other person and say, "Here, stick your feet in here!" Nobody wants to have his feet washed with boiling hot water. Some go to the other extreme and come with ice water. They are so righteously holier-than-thou, so remote from this whole dirty proposition, so above it all. They come with this frigid, freezing water and they want to wash your feet. Nobody will allow it under those conditions. And some, unfortunately, try to do it without water at all! They come and dry clean your feet; they scrape them free of their dirt. Have you ever had anyone do that to you? They come and give you a piece of their mind, just tear into you. What they say may be true, but there is no water of love at all, nothing to wash it gently away, only a rigid insistence upon scraping away the dirt and the skin along with it. But our Lord insists that we wash one another's feet in love. This is the manifestation that he loved his disciples, and he loved them to the end.

Notice the promised results: "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them." That is, this is the secret of maintaining harmony among Christians, in a Christian family and in the larger family of the church.

A number of months ago a young man came to me from another church in this area. He was greatly distressed. He had found that one of the outstanding young laymen of the church, who had been appointed as a sponsor of the youth group of that church, was guilty of immorality with a young girl. This was threatening his marriage. And rumors of it had spread among the young people, so that the whole church was beginning to stir. It looked like a terrible disaster, a tragic occurrence that would split the church when it all came to light. This troubled young man asked me, "What should I do?" I said, "Well, you've been given guidelines in the Scriptures as to what to do. 'Go to your brother and tell him his fault, between you and him alone; if he shall hear you, you have gained your brother.'" (That is washing his feet.)

So he went back, and in a few weeks I got a letter from him. He said, "I took your advice. I went to him and simply told him what I knew. And I told him in love. I didn't try to destroy him. I didn't try to condemn him. I

understood the pressures, the passions which moved him to this wrongdoing, and I loved him. But I told him what was happening in the congregation, and that what he had done was wrong. He acknowledged it, and together we went to the leaders of the church and laid the whole matter before them. The result has been that this man has voluntarily left his ministry for awhile, until all this is straightened out in his life. But he himself has been healed, and his marriage has been saved and restored. And the church has been strengthened by all this, rather than split." This is what Jesus means when he says, "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."

The last part of the paragraph presents the contrast provided by Judas. Jesus says,

**"I am not speaking of you all; I know whom I have chosen; it is that the scripture may be fulfilled, 'He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.' I tell you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he. Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives any one whom I send receives me; and he who receives me receives him who sent me." {John 13:18-20 RSV}**

The contrast here is between the knowledge of Jesus, and the ignorant unbelief of Judas. Jesus knew what was happening. He walked in the light of the Scriptures. He knew from the Scriptures what the events of this last week would be. He knew from the Scriptures that one among those close to him would betray him, and he knew from the beginning which one it would be. But Judas didn't know that. Judas was ignorantly following the avarice and greed of his own heart, and he was resisting every effort Jesus made to reach him. Now he was on the very verge of that final act of rejection which would plunge him over the precipice into utter and complete disaster.

In the very next paragraph you see that described -- how he took the sop from Jesus' hand, and that was the final chance he had. When he did, Satan entered into him, and Judas was no longer his own master in any degree at all. But Jesus indicates that he understands what will happen. He says, "I'm telling you this before it happens, so when it does, you will know I am the one this Scripture describes. I am the one the Psalm is speaking about." Judas, on the other hand, was utterly ignorant. He didn't know what was happening to him, or how he had fallen into Satan's snare, and now was at the very brink of disaster. As you read this account, you can see how these two stand opposed one to another. Jesus sacrificed himself in order to save his disciples; Judas sacrificed Jesus in order to save himself. Those two philosophies dominate the world today.

In this final appeal, Jesus is directing a word to the holders of the two basic attitudes present, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives any one whom I send receives me." That is a word to the disciples, and to us, that when someone comes to us to wash our feet, to help us with some problem of sin or error in our life, we are to remember that this person is sent by Jesus. Therefore it is Jesus himself who is standing before us. It is he who is offering to wash our feet. And we are not to resent this kind of ministry on the part of others. We are not to say, "You have no right to come to me. This is my own private affair; you have nothing to do with it." But we are to remember that "He who receives any one whom I send," Jesus says, "receives me." Let us not, like Peter, fall into the error of rejecting the indispensable ministry of cleansing which Jesus offers.

The last word was addressed to Judas: "And he who receives me receives him who sent me." That is, he receives the Father himself, God the Father. And there is no other way to the Father but by Jesus. This is the truth Jesus declares again and again, and it is the great truth which Judas sought to circumvent. He tried to relate to God without accepting Jesus. He tried to live his life before God without relating at all to the ministry and the salvation offered by Jesus.

There are many like that today, who, like Judas, are stumbling blindly on, not realizing that they are facing the most important crisis of their life, and that only Jesus can bring them to God. Jesus said so himself in Chapter 14, just a page or two further on: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me," {John 14:6}. This was Jesus' last-ditch stand to reach Judas before it was too late, and he failed, as subsequent events will show. But the great truth he leaves before us is this: THERE IS NO OTHER WAY.

None other Lamb, none other Name,

None other Hope in heaven or earth or sea,  
None other Hiding Place from guilt and shame,  
None beside Thee.

## Prayer

Our Father, there may be some among us who, having come to church many, many times, having mingled with the people of God, having sought to live as they do, have never yet come into that saving relationship with the Lord Jesus. Thus they have refused the bath of forgiveness, of justification, have refused to acknowledge their own need of cleansing, and have tried to cleanse themselves, to make their own lives right before you. Lord Jesus, we pray in this moment that you will deal with them just as you dealt with Judas, and will help them to see what they are doing. For those of us, Lord, who have come through the bath but who still need the ministry of others to us, help us to understand that it is you, Lord, who stand before us in our brother, in our sister, who comes to admonish us, to exhort us, to seek to correct us and to lead us back into paths of righteousness and peace. May we not reject this ministry, Lord, for in so doing we reject you, as Peter did, and we therefore have no sense of enjoyment in our lives. Heal our lives by this means we pray, Lord Jesus, in your name and for your sake, Amen.

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