

SERVANT OR LORD?

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on July 11, 1965 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

When Jesus had lived all but one of the approximate 12,000 days of his life on earth, when he had lived all but one of the approximate 1200 days of his public ministry, he came to the most important twenty-four hours of his entire existence on earth. On the evening before his crucifixion Jesus spent several of these hours in an upper room in Jerusalem with his apostles. The apostle John tells of this climactic period, sometimes called the Holy of Holies of Christ's life, in the thirteenth through the seventeenth chapters of the gospel. With the most significant event in the history of the world, so far as man's ultimate good is concerned, just a few hours away, Christ presented his final discourse to his apostles.

It was on this unusually significant occasion that Christ instituted the Lord's Supper, with all of its future meaningfulness to millions of Christians who would live throughout all the Christian centuries. It was on this same evening that Jesus explained that the third person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit, would soon come to take his place after he left the earth. The events in the upper room came to their climax, in John's 17th chapter, with the intercessory prayer in which Jesus prayed that his apostles might not be taken out of the world, but that they might be kept from the evil one. He then prayed that all who should believe on him might be one. Finally, on this important night in the upper room in Jerusalem, Jesus also washed his disciples' feet. It is this event to which we turn our attention in this study. Significantly, John tells of this event.

What Jesus Did

Our text consists of the first seventeen verses of the thirteenth chapter of John. It begins, "Now before the feast of the passover, Jesus knowing that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own that were in the world, he loved them unto the end. And during supper, the devil having already put 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 came forth from God, and goeth unto God, riseth from supper, and layeth aside his garments; and he took a towel, and girded himself." (John 13:1-4).

At this point we pause to visualize the scene being described. Jesus and his apostles had been residing during this last week before his crucifixion at the little town of Bethany, located on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, some two miles east of Jerusalem. There, they would walk in the narrow streets used constantly by both men and animals. These streets were never washed except by an occasional rain. When one remembers that the apostles and others of their day wore the open-toed leather sandals which exposed their feet to the dirt and filth of the streets, he understands the custom of the washing of feet to be quite necessary. Ordinarily, the host would arrange for a servant to perform this service for each of his guests. It was a menial task and was considered to be the exclusive work of servants. When John the Baptist desired to give expression to his feeling of unworthiness in comparison to Christ, he could think of no better way to express this than to say that he deemed himself unworthy of kneeling down in front of Jesus in order to unloose his sandal straps and remove the sandals (with a view to washing the Master's feet).

But here in the upper room there was no servant. Hence, one of the disciples would have to perform this menial service for the rest. But none was willing. These men were too proud. They often busied themselves with concern about which among them was the greatest and which would have the place at the Lord's right hand and at the Lord's left hand when he established his kingdom. Luke 22:24-26 says, "And there arose also a contention among them, which of them was accounted to be greatest. And he said unto them, The kings of the gentiles have lordship over them; and they that have authority over them are called benefactors. But ye shall not be so: but he that is the greatest among you, let him become as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve." On this or another occasion Jesus said to his disciples, as recorded in Matthew 20:26-28, "Whosoever would become great among you shall be your minister; and whosoever shall be first among you shall be your servant: even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Only The Lord Was Willing

In the upper room everything was ready. There was the pitcher and the wash-basin. There also was the long linen cloth, called here a towel. There was water in the pitcher. Yet no one stirred. Each disciple was hoping that someone else would make the first move. It was in the midst of men who, though generally good, thought of themselves as being above so menial a task as the washing of feet that our Lord acted. With calmness and majesty, he arose from the supper and laid aside his garments. We are reminded of Phil. 2:7 where the apostle Paul uses the expression concerning our Lord, "Taking the form of a servant."

Here we begin again to read from our text, "Then he poureth water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded." As the apostles reclined upon elbows in the ancient manner about the table, each man's feet were conveniently placed for the Lord to wash them. We do not know with which apostle he began, but soon the text continues -, "So he cometh to Simon Peter. He saith unto him, Lord, dost thou wash my feet? Jesus answered and said unto him, What

I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt understand hereafter.” Jesus is not only saying that Peter will understand the meaningfulness of the lesson when he has finished washing the disciples’ feet, but is suggesting that not until he has been crucified will the impact of the total offering of himself in humility for mankind be apparent to Peter and the rest. This humble act in the upper room is symbolic of the total act of humility which Jesus came to the earth to perform.

At this point, “Peter saith unto him, Thou shalt never wash my feet. Jesus answered him. If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me. Simon Peter saith unto him, Lord, not my feet only, but my hands and my head.” Someone has spoken of the changeableness of Peter as being like the country, farm boy who carelessly carries a bucket of milk, first sloshing the milk out on one side and then on the other. Peter does his thinking aloud. First, Peter refused to let the Lord wash his feet, then he begged for the washing of hands and head also.

“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 him that should betray him; therefore said he, Ye are not all clean.” (John 13:5-11). Obviously, Jesus’ statement has a double meaning. There is the surface meaning that Jesus was clean, except for his feet. Then, there was the secondary meaning that the twelve apostles were clean, except for Judas, who was already in the process of selling his Lord for thirty pieces of silver. As one reads the gospel according to John, he finds many of these passages that have a surface meaning and then a deeper spiritual meaning. This type of paragram is known as a “mashal” and is especially characteristic of the reports which John gives of Christ’s teachings.

Why Jesus Did It

Having examined in some detail what Jesus did, we next turn to a consideration of the why behind the act. Our text continues, “So when he had washed their feet and taken his garments, and sat down again, he said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me, Teacher, and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher have washed your feet, ye also ought to wash one another’s feet.” In these words Jesus has plainly declared himself to be divine. Jesus was no mere man. He had existed in the beginning of time with God in heaven and had been party to the creation of the universe. (Gen. 1:26; John 1:1-3, 14). In this text he is saying simply that if he, as the divine Son of God, could wash the dirty feet of men, surely his disciples could do so.

Some have thought that this passage is an authorization and requirement that Christians should wash feet as an act of worship. They reasoned, “Did not Jesus institute the Lord’s Supper on this same evening? If, then, he washed the disciples’ feet and instituted the Lord’s Supper on the same occasion, are not both equally binding upon Christians as acts of worship.” Notice carefully our text, “For I have given you an example,” said the Lord, “that ye also should do as I have done to you.” Notice that Jesus does not say “ye shall do what I have done to you,” but rather “as I have done to you.” There is a vast difference. Jesus was teaching humility, not foot-washing. He does not command his disciples and us to do what he did--wash feet, but he does require us to do as he did--be willing and ready to render whatever menial service our fellowmen may need. In our day we do not have the same conditions that created the need for the washing of feet each time a person enters the home of a host. It would be both unnecessary and unappreciated if we should offer such service when visitors arrive in our homes. Jesus therefore taught that we should have the attitude of heart that would lead us to render any humble service that men might need.

This interpretation must be the correct interpretation because as one reads the rest of the New Testament he finds the Lord’s Supper was clearly taught by the apostles as an act of weekly worship wherever they went, (II Cor. 11:23-30), but he also finds that the washing of feet was never taught as an act of worship. We must remember that the apostles were to be guided by the Holy Spirit into all truth, (John 16:13), and that they never taught the washing of feet as an act of worship. The only time that it is ever mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament is in I Tim. 5:9-10, which reads, “Let none be enrolled as a widow under three score years old, having been the wife of one man, well reported of for good works; if she hath brought up children, if she hath used hospitality to strangers, if she hath washed the saints’ feet, if she hath relieved the afflicted, if she hath diligently followed every good work.” Notice that each of these acts is an act of hospitality in the home. None are acts of public worship.

Our text continues and comes to its close with the words, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, A servant is not greater than his Lord; neither one that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, blessed are ye if ye do them.” (John 13:12-17).

Three Major Premises

If you noticed carefully, you noticed that I did not pause for comment upon the first three verses of our text. It was not because they were of no significance but rather because they are of such unusual significance that their message would be more meaningful after we had read the story of Christ’s act of humility. Notice these verses again, “Now before the feast of the passover, Jesus knowing that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father,” and here I would suggest the first of three significant premises, “having loved his own that were in the world, he loved them unto the end.” The motivation behind this entire sequence of events was Christ’s great love for his disciples. Here at the beginning of the five great chapters in John that constitute the Holy of Holies, Jesus knew that his disciples still had feelings of envy, rivalry and jealousy among themselves about which should be greatest. He loved them so deeply that he could not allow this canker of the heart to continue among them. Accordingly, with his divine insight, he outwardly cleansed their feet, in order that he might inwardly cleanse their hearts. In the washing of their feet, Christ taught them the

humility that washed their hearts. While we have read of rivalry among the apostles earlier in the narrative, we do not read of rivalry among the apostles after this deeply moving experience with their Lord.

The second premise can be very simply stated. There were twelve men in the room whose feet Jesus washed. The greatness of his heart is seen when we realize that Jesus washed the feet of Judas Iscariot, who was to use those feet next to walk into the garden and bring back a mob to arrest Christ. Our text says, "And during supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him" Christ washed the feet of Judas, knowing all the while what Judas was about to do.

Finally, we are impressed with the words of our text, "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he came forth from God, and goeth unto God ..." Realizing full well who he himself was, the divine Son of God, Christ was willing to wash the dirty feet of men. He did it with full knowledge of where he had spent eternity past and where he would soon spend eternity future. God in the flesh washed the feet of men.

Conclusion

In the long ago Augustine spoke of pride as man's greatest sin. By this he simply meant man's tendency to worship himself. Man has always been self-centered and proud. Coming to Christ means that we must conquer this central sin of the heart. In accepting Christ as our Lord and Savior we must humble ourselves and make Christ the center of our lives.

Christ's words, as we find them in Matt. 16:24-25, summarizes the message of our text, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever shall save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it.