

Hugo Bouter

The Master wanted to become a Servant

Thoughts on the washing of the disciples' feet

"Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. And supper being ended (or, during supper), the devil having 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 and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself.

After that, 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. Then He came to Simon Peter. And Peter said to Him, "Lord, are You washing my feet?" Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this." 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." Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you." For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said, "You are not all clean."

John 13:1-11

The hour has come

Three times in this portion of Scripture we read that Jesus knew certain things beforehand (John 13:1, 3, 11). First, He knew that His hour had come, which is a term that always refers to His impending sufferings and death (cf. John 12:23; 17:1; cf. also John 7:6, 8 and Mark 14:41). Elsewhere He says that the hour was at hand (Matt. 26:45).

But the Lord directly connects this hour of deep suffering with its glorious results. His departure from this world meant His return to the Father, Who had sent Him into the world to glorify the Father's name and to accomplish the work of redemption. He was to pass to the Father. He was going to His God (John 13:1, 3). And so we find it in the Son's prayer to the Father (John 17:1-5). The hour had now come to glorify the Son and exalt Him at God's right hand in heaven. He returned to the Father to inherit as Man the glory that He possessed with the Father long before the world existed. So He did not return empty-handed, as we also see under the next heading, but as the Heir of all things in heaven and on earth. It was because of the heavenly joy that lay before Him that He endured the cross and despised the shame (Heb. 12:2).

Another important motive for the Lord's agony was His love for His own, which was without end and without any limit. He loved us to the end, or fully (John 13:1b). He loved not only His Father, Who had sent Him into the world, but also all His own who were in the world and whom the Father had given Him as a gift of love. This love also drove Him to surrender Himself in death and to become the true Lamb of God. Nor would He leave His own, who remained in the world, without a Helper. For He would send them the Comforter from the presence of the Father, as we see later in these chapters in the Gospel of John.

The Father had entrusted all things into His hands

Secondly, the Lord also knew that the Father had given all things into His hands, just as Abraham had once done with his favorite son Isaac, whom he had been asked to sacrifice on the altar (Gen. 24:36; 25:5). This sacrifice is a familiar picture of the death and resurrection of Christ (Heb. 11:18-19). The sufferings of the Son were an additional reason for the Father to think of Him and to put everything into His hands. The Father loves the Son and He will soon make Him great before the whole universe.

Because of the sufferings of death, God has already exalted Him beyond measure and given Him the Name above all names, so that in the Name of Jesus every knee of those in heaven, and those on earth, and those under the earth, will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:9-11). This will actually happen at His coming, and no creature is exempt from it. In Revelation 19, He appears in majesty as the King of kings and the Lord of lords (Rev. 19:16). What a day that will be!

The difference between bathing and washing

Surely it is extraordinary that the Lord of lords wanted to be the Servant of His own! He was not ashamed to kneel in the upper room and wash the feet of His disciples and dry them with the linen towel with which He was girded (John 13:4-5). Here on earth He wore the girdle of the perfect Servant, and He humbled Himself and became obedient to death. Soon at His appearing He will be honored as the Word of God in His own Person (Rev. 19:13), and then He will fulfill all God's counsels. We have already referred to the Name that will be written on His garment and on His hip: King of kings and Lord of lords!

So He loved you and me also, that He wanted to wash and cleanse the feet of His followers from everything that can cling to and defile us on earth. And He still is cleansing us with the water of the Word, in order to sanctify us and make us fit for His own glorious presence (Eph. 5:26-27). For He wants to make us fit to share with Himself the glories of heaven, after His return to the Father (John 13:8b).

Perhaps we also do not always understand that the washing of our feet is really necessary for this purpose, just as Peter could not understand it and with great determination refused to have his feet washed by the Lord. He did not yet see that the Master had become a Servant, Who wanted to do everything to give His own the enjoyment of all the heavenly blessings in His presence (Eph. 1). Peter also had not understood that he was already basically clean through the word the Lord had spoken to them, i.e. through the washing with the water of the Word at their calling (John 13:8-10; 15:3).

Those who have undergone the water bath of the Word at their conversion are completely clean. Of this we need not doubt. But the daily cleansing by the Word also remains necessary to maintain our fellowship with Him, so that we are able to serve Him truthfully. It is like with the priests under the old covenant. At their

ordination they underwent the complete washing with water (Lev. 8:6), but for their daily service in the sanctuary they still had to wash their hands and feet each time with the water from the laver of bronze (Ex. 30:18-21). The complete washing speaks of the one-time washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit (Tit. 3:5), but the daily washing is necessary to bring our conduct and walk into conformity with the requirements of God's Word.

The Lord clearly says that they were completely clean, with the exception of Judas who would betray Him (John 13:10-20). For He knew who would hand Him over. This is the third time in this passage that we read that He knew what was going to happen. The designation of the traitor moved the Lord at the Passover meal with the disciples, and Judas was exposed by Him as a tool of Satan. But it was all necessary so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled (John 13:18; Ps. 41:10).

The washing of feet as an example for us

Meanwhile, with this the Master has given us a practical example of self-denial and service to one another, which we may emulate daily (John 13:12-17). This is certainly not always easy, but it is in accordance with the new commandment of love, about which the Lord speaks later after Judas has disappeared in the night. The divine measure of this commandment is Jesus' own love for His own (John 13:34-35).

Sometimes we will have to bow down deeply to another in order to wash the feet of our fellow brother or sister. But He has given us this example, "that you should do as I have done to you" (v. 15). For a slave is not greater than his Lord, and an envoy not greater than his Sender. And the Lord calls us happy (or "blessed"), if we imitate His example (vs. 17).

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