

Washed Feet

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in an nine-part series

June 16, 2024

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Matthew 20:25–28 (NIV)

²⁵Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—²⁸just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

John 13:1–17 (NIV)

It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

²The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. ³Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; ⁴so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?”

⁷Jesus replied, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.”

⁸“No,” said Peter, “you shall never wash my feet.”

Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.”

⁹“Then, Lord,” Simon Peter replied, “not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!”

¹⁰Jesus answered, “Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.”

¹¹For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

¹²When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. ¹³“You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Where is the Good News in a simple washing of feet?

The foot-washing scene is one of the most well-known stories from the gospel of John. It has been depicted by countless artists. Churches across Christendom re-enact it. If we asked Christians the point of the story, we’d probably first hear about it being an example of serving one another, especially those who we think are our “lessers.” Some might go further as seeing in the story what it really means to love one another. All this is found in the story. Jesus himself says his

washing of the disciples' feet is an "example" of what the disciples should do. Indeed, it certainly is.

But there is an even larger point that we are to led by the opening verses of the story. A close, informed reading of the first three verses helps us to see that this story is first and foremost about the self-revelation of Jesus, in keeping with the rest of John's gospel. Here is N. T. Wright on these verses. This is from his commentary, *John for Everyone*. I can highly recommend this *New Testament for Everyone* series for all lay people. It is inexpensive and especially useful for a daily reading plan, as each New Testament book is broken-up into bite-sized chunks. So, about those first three verses:

The first three verses form a detailed introduction both to the footwashing scene and to the whole of the rest of the book. Watch how John, like a brilliant artist, fills in the background with three quick strokes of the brush. Understand each of these, and you'll see not only what the footwashing meant but also what Jesus' death and resurrection mean.

First, Passover. We know John well enough by now to know that, when he mentions a Jewish festival, he wants us to understand that Jesus is applying its meaning to himself. Passover has been, from the start of this book, the greatest of the festivals. Jesus is the Passover lamb (1:29, 36). He spoke, at Passover, of the Temple being destroyed and rebuilt—meaning his own body (2:19–21). He fed the crowds at Passover-time, and spoke of them feeding on his body and blood (chapter 6). Now he is back in Jerusalem for a final Passover. John does not describe the meal itself; presumably he supposes that his readers know the story of it well enough from other traditions, and from their regular experience of the eucharist. But in this extraordinary scene he explains, just the same, what the meal was all about, and how it pointed on beyond itself to the events of the following day.

Second, Jesus' time had come. We saw in the previous chapter (12:23, 27) how Jesus had seen the moment dawning, the moment for which all his career so far had been preparing. But now John describes this 'time' in a way which goes beyond what has been said so far, and sets up a whole sequence of ideas which Jesus will explore in the coming chapters. It is time—time for Jesus 'to leave this world and go to the father'.

Not simply 'time for Jesus to die', though that is part of what this means. We should not make the mistake many have made, and suppose that Jesus, in this gospel or any of the others, simply 'died and went to heaven'. John is clear, in 20:17, that after his death Jesus is *first* raised to new life, then meets the disciples, and only *then* 'goes up to the father'. But it is this complex and completely unexpected sequence of events, the whole thing together, that means he is 'going to the father'. This is what gives new depth and meaning both to the footwashing and the crucifixion. They are the events which form the ladder from this world to the father's world. They are the acted words the eternal Word must speak. They are the way home that the son of God must take.

Third, and for John still more important, what is now done is done as the action of supreme love. Think back to the 'good shepherd' of chapter 10. The shepherd loves his own sheep, and they love him in return. And the greatest thing the shepherd can do for them is to lay down his life. Now, says John, 'he loved them right through to the end'. Not just with a dogged

see-it-through love, though that is there too. He loved them ‘to the uttermost’. There was nothing that love could do for them that he did not now do.

All this, astonishingly, is contained simply in the first verse. The second and third, too, prepare the way. First there is Judas, allowing the devil’s whispered suggestion to gain a foothold in his imagination. We shall return to this, but notice how evil creeps in between the cracks at the very moment when love is going to the limit. There is nothing cozy or romantic about this scene. It is about love betrayed, not just love portrayed.

But then, in verse 3, we see the full picture. The Word who was with God, the Word who was God, became flesh. He laid aside the clothes of glory, and put on our human nature, in order to wash our feet. He had come from God and was going to God. Here John is very close to Paul in Philippians 2:5–11. And notice that here, as there, the point is not to say, ‘Fancy! Despite the fact that he had come from God, he nevertheless washed their feet!’ The point is to say, ‘No: washing their feet was what he had to do, precisely *because* he had come from God.’ The footwashing—and the crucifixion itself, to which it pointed—was Jesus’ way of showing who God was and is. Next time Jesus has his clothes changed it will be to reveal him as ‘the man’, the king (19:5); after that he will be naked on the cross, revealing the father’s heart as he gives his life for the world.¹

Just in those three verses, we see that Jesus is Good News indeed!

Servants of God . . . and, hence, one another

Jesus’ proclamation of the Good News is a proclamation that he is Lord and the Jews of his day would have heard this to be the claim of a master who is to be served. But . . . when Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem for the Passover, the disciples fell to arguing about who would sit at Jesus’ side. Jesus tells them that they don’t really know what they are asking for, that whoever wishes to be first among them must be the slave of them all, and that, perhaps most remarkably, that he had come “not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt 20:20-38).

Just in case his disciples didn’t get it (as they usually didn’t), Jesus drove home the importance of servanthood on the night of the last supper. He washes the feet of his disciples, not despite being God, but *because* he is God. Jesus *is* love . . . love in action, which we call, serving.

Jesus calls us to be “servants of all” (Mark 9:35). Paul reminds us that we proclaim Jesus as Lord and are to be servants for Jesus’ sake (2 Cor 4:5). But what does this service really look like? Isn’t it pretty easy for our service to become self-righteous rather than true service of God? In *The Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster² helps us to see what self-righteous service looks like so we can better grasp the meaning of true service.

Self-righteous service comes from human effort; true service comes out of our relationship with Jesus. Self-righteous service is concerned with the “big”

¹ Wright, T. (2004). *John for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 11-21* (43–45). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

² Foster, Richard. 1978. *The Celebration of Discipline*. San Francisco: Harper. If you haven’t ever read Foster’s book, I highly recommend it. There are good reasons why it has been a best-seller for 25 years.

project or “big” deal; true service doesn’t discriminate among the opportunities to serve. Self-righteous service requires external rewards; true service needs only God’s approval. Foster suggests that self-righteous service is focused only on the results, while true service “delights” in the service. Self-righteous service is affected by our whims and moods; true service carries on whether we feel like it or not! Self-righteous service can fracture a community as people strive for control and recognition; true service is selfless and heals a community. Self-righteous service enhances our dignity in the eyes of others. True service reminds us that we are all undignified before God. The New Testament witness reminds us time and again that we are called to be servants of God, servants called to build up the covenant community in which we live and to be a witness to those who live outside the covenant.

A Servant’s Service

Though we are 2,000 years removed from the first communities of Christians, our challenges are not really so different. When the apostles were overwhelmed by their duties, they enlisted others, like Stephen, to help out, serving the young Christian church. Paul taught the churches he founded that God gives us all gifts to use in our service to God. Some are helpers, some are teachers, some are preachers, some are leaders, some are given gifts of knowledge, or wisdom, or mercy, or giving. The point is that we are all to serve. The Book of Joshua tells how the Hebrews conquered the Promised Land – or, more correctly, how God conquered it for them. At the end of the book, Joshua brings to God’s people words of covenant renewal. “Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness . . . if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve . . . as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (from Joshua 24:14-15).

When we join a Methodist church we promise to “uphold it with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service.” This is a practical expression of our commitment to be servants of God and to do his work. The question is not whether we will serve, but only how. We might serve by teaching a children’s Sunday School class, or singing in the choir, or answering the church phones on a Sunday morning, or serving in the Food Pantry or Joseph’s Coat or Project Hope or in Costa Rica . . . there is no end to the opportunities, for there is no end to the needs. Make no mistake; God wants more from us than simply an hour or two on Sunday mornings. Donald Whitney says it well, “Disciplined service to God is work, hard and costly labor sometimes, but it will endure for all eternity.”³ We, the people of God, are called to lives of joyful service to God.

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: We begin the book of Judges this week

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *Acts*

NO CLASS THIS WEEK, JUNE 18, DUE TO VBS

³ Whitney, Donald. 1991. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. Colorado Springs: NavPress. p. 121

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

This week: *Digging Deeper: Jesus' Temptation in the Wilderness*

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.