

Lessons on Washing Feet and on Following Jesus – John 13 and 21

A devotional by Mark Chase

In John 13, at the start of the Last Supper, Jesus washes His disciples' feet. At first Peter objects, but relents when Jesus says (vs 8) "Unless I wash you, you have no part in me". Because of Jesus subsequent statement (vs 9) "And you are clean, though not every one of you", we recognize that Jesus was speaking of spiritual cleansing and not just physical cleansing. Most of have heard the application of Jesus instruction (vs 14) to "wash one another's feet" as an instruction to gently hold one another accountable and to submit to the same. James makes a similar point in 5:16 "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed".

For some reason I've always thought that the interaction with Peter enabled Jesus to elevate the lesson and convey a deeper message, as He often did. I've always just assumed that Peter ended up hearing the lesson and having his feet washed, period. It was only when I read it recently that I realized that perhaps Jesus was also telling Peter that he still needed a spiritual cleansing, and that Jesus was preparing him for that. If that is the case, given that we are told to follow Jesus example (vs 15), what does that example look like?

A bit later in John chapter 13, when Jesus predicts His betrayal and gives His disciples the new command to "Love one another" (vs 34), Peter brags (vs 37) "I will lay down my life for you." Jesus responds (vs 38), "before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times". Peter had already recognized and acclaimed Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the Living God" (Matthew 16:16. Peter was already clean (John 13:10). But let me suggest that this may be the beginning of Peter's spiritual cleansing – and of another lesson for us. Up to this point in Peter's story, we see numerous anecdotes showing that Peter was quick to act impulsively, too sure of himself, too full of himself. As a cleansing example, this indicates that:

- 1) Jesus knew Peter.
- 2) Jesus, full of grace and truth (John 1:14), told him the truth in love.

Late that night, as Peter is watching Jesus first trial before Annas and is warming himself by the fire, he is questioned. He denies Jesus three times. Luke adds the detail that as the rooster crowed, (22:61) "The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter." Peter recognized what he had done and went out and wept, bitterly.

- 3) I wonder whether this part of the example might be that Jesus saw Peter in the midst of his crisis, but he allowed Peter to face the crisis alone and did not jump in to rescue or to criticize or condemn him.

Soon after the resurrection, Luke 24:34 and 1 Cor 15:5 tell us that Jesus met with Peter. Nothing is recorded of this conversation. Imagine it!

- 4) I imagine that this critical part of Jesus example of spiritual cleansing is that it is private, personal, and life-giving. We can be pretty sure that Peter said how sorry he was and that Jesus forgave him. I think it is safe to imagine that Peter felt he had failed Jesus, and that Jesus explained that quite the contrary, by learning humility Peter could now become the obedient servant, and the leader, that Jesus intended him to be.

John 21 records the completion of the cleansing process when Jesus appears to several of the disciples and feeds them breakfast by the Sea of Galilee. There are several details that Peter and Jesus would connect with his denial. It takes place by a charcoal fire, Peter is questioned three times, Peter acknowledges (vs 17) “Lord, you know all things”, and, after giving Peter a special commission, Jesus reminds him twice (vs 19 and 22) “Follow me.” The essential message of the cleansing is in the final words “Follow me”. I read these words in the past as something that Peter had heard many times before. In fact, they were among the first words Jesus had said to Peter when he called him (Mark 1:17). But let us think about the additional layer of meaning. In Peter’s call, as in the story of the Good Shepherd and other passages, following Jesus suggests coming with Him, learning from Him, imitating Him. This time, it means something more. Peter was no longer to be impetuous and self-reliant. As Jesus had also told his disciples in his message of the vine and the branches (John 15:5) “Apart from me, you can do nothing”. Peter had learned the message to be an obedient, submissive follower and to rely on his Lord.

As a spiritual cleansing example, it provides two final elements:

- 5) Jesus encouraged Peter in a role for which he was gifted, prepared and equipped.
- 6) Jesus reminded Peter that the central message for him, as for any believer, is to follow Him.

If Jesus intended us to notice how He washed Peter with a spiritual cleansing and to draw lessons from His example, there is a number of points offered above that bear reflection.

The foot washing story also reminds all of us that Jesus seems to caution us that we may pick up dirt on our feet as we walk through the world, and we may need to get close enough to fellow believers for them to wash us. While a pastor may do that for us, the quotation that Mark Price shared reminds us of the value and significance of friends – with whom we may be mutually accountable.

And a good concluding reminder is that it is all about learning to follow Jesus.

Looking back on this devotional, I realize that in a number of ways it feels for me like a bit of a tribute to Chris – his teaching and his modelling. I’ll leave it for each of you to reflect on how that may be true for you. Use the reflection as a basis to pray giving thanks for his ministry and asking that God continue to teach you the lessons that are intended for you.