

## Mortal Combat: Jesus vs. Cleanliness

John 13:1-15, 34-35 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. <sup>3</sup> Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; <sup>4</sup> so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. <sup>5</sup> After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. <sup>6</sup> He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" <sup>7</sup> Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." <sup>8</sup> "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." <sup>9</sup> "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" <sup>10</sup> Jesus 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." <sup>11</sup> For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean. <sup>12</sup> When 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. <sup>13</sup> "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. <sup>14</sup> Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup> I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. <sup>34</sup> "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

"Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God." (verse 3) Jesus has unlimited cosmic power here on the Thursday before his crucifixion. And what does he do with that power, knowing that he's about to return to God? "So he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him." (verses 4-5) He got down on his hands and knees and washed the dirty, stinky feet of his disciples. Jesus used his great power to serve.

It is a great thing to serve others. It's what we as Christians are called to do. Being connected to Jesus, the Vine, we produce fruit. We do things for other people. God gave us gifts to be used for the benefit of others. He even prepared opportunities in advance for us to serve others. When Pastor Matt Vogt was here about 2 weeks ago, he shared with us that we bring Jesus' Light to the world when we serve others. He gave us ideas to be that Light while volunteering at food banks or at public events. Christians serve, and this is a good thing.

But serving others is not limited to bigger events, things that are seen and praised by people. It's great to go to a third world country and help them build houses or dig wells, but do you know what's also great? Changing a diaper. Getting up with the sick kid in the middle of the night. Doing your chores without grumbling or complaining. Holding a door for someone. Taking out the trash. Washing dishes, putting them away. Putting address labels on postcards. Shoveling a walk. These are just some of the great works that God has prepared in advance specifically for us to do, things that actually make a difference to him, even if we don't think so. Service is part of the Christian's life.

However, the disciples weren't thinking about service when it came to washing everyone's feet on this Thursday night, but Jesus did. Watching the all-powerful God wash dirty, stinky, smelly feet makes us think about ways that we can serve like Jesus did. Are there opportunities that I've never thought were serving but actually are? Are there tasks that I think are too small or too dirty for me to do? Will I challenge myself to look for more service opportunities and serve like Jesus did, following his example?

But there's another side to this conversation about serving. When Jesus got to Simon Peter, Peter refused to let Jesus wash his feet. "No, you shall never wash my feet." (verse 8a) He wouldn't let Jesus do something so demeaning, so below him. Peter could wash his own feet. Jesus shouldn't be doing this. Peter was not about to be served by Jesus.

We understand that Christians service, but how comfortable are you being served? There certainly are times when we are served by other people, and it is much needed help and relief. We rejoice at those moments, especially as we are stretched in time, strength, or ability. But do we more often than not refuse to let people serve us, like Peter did? Do we do this because we take pride in doing it ourselves, that we're self-sufficient? Do we see someone shoveling our walk and think, "But I can do that myself; they shouldn't do it."? In fact, have we defined ourselves by our service to others, that what we do makes us who we are, that what we do gives us our value and worth?

If service is our identity, our value, our worth, what happens when you can't do the things you used to? You become lost. You feel worthless. Life has no meaning. You feel like a dirty drain on society since you can't serve as you always have.

Peter felt uncomfortable, maybe dirty even, watching Jesus wash all the other disciples' feet, knowing that he or one of the other disciples should have stepped up to the task and done the serving. They were perfectly capable of doing it, but they didn't. Maybe it was because they thought it was beneath them. Maybe they just never thought to do it. Maybe they were tired and lacked the energy for one more task. Whatever the reason, Peter tried to reject Jesus serving him.

Jesus replied to Peter's rejection of his service by saying, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." (verse 8b) At this response, Peter flipped his desire. "Okay, Jesus. If you washing clean the dirt from my feet means that I have a part with you, then wash my whole body!" Maybe Peter was thinking about his baptism. Maybe he thought this foot washing was some physical act that would have spiritual ramifications, that the washing would make him belong to Jesus.

But that's not the point of what Jesus did this night. Jesus wasn't fighting dirt. Peter didn't need a bath. Peter needed to be served, served by Jesus. This was Jesus' mission, the mission he was carrying out having all things under his power. He didn't wash his disciples' feet to show them how to become clean by serving others. No. "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45) By washing his disciples' feet, Jesus was fulfilling perfect service for us.

We know that we've often failed to serve – whether it's because we are oblivious to the service opportunity, whether we think it is a task that's beneath us, whether it's a task that we physically can't do, or whether we don't have the time to do it. Our lives are ones of imperfect service. We never do enough to meet God's perfect requirements.

This is why Jesus serves perfectly for us in our place to make us clean. He used his grand, cosmic, divine power to serve for all the times we don't, for all the times we serve begrudgingly, for all the times we were too tired, for all the times we were oblivious to the service opportunities that God had prepared in advance specifically for us. Jesus washed his disciples' feet – for his perfect record of service to be credited to them and to us. Since Christ served us, our service is already complete and we are clean, just like Peter. This is our identity. Our value and worth is in what Jesus did for us. And when our identity is in how Jesus served us, then it never changes, no matter what we can or can't do.

Having been served by Jesus' perfect service, we still strive to serve others. Service to others is still a good thing, even though it doesn't make us who we are – only Jesus and what he did for us can be our identity. So, we serve for a different reason, the reason Jesus gave on this night. Jesus said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (verses 34-35) We serve to show Jesus' love, to show people Jesus who perfectly served us. We serve to be Jesus' Light to the world.

This is why we continue to look for opportunities to serve. This is why we value the little acts of service done when no one is watching, when no one seemingly cares along with the big acts that all sorts of people see and praise. We know that everything that we do wherever we are is done in service to God and to others. We do this to show people the same service love that Christ already lived perfect for us, to show people that we have a God who serves us.

Jesus didn't wash his disciples' feet to fight dirt; he washed their feet to show them how his service to them is what makes them clean, not their service to others. Our identity is as one who has been perfectly served by Christ. Being made clean by what he did for us, we serve others to show them Jesus' perfect service done for us. Jesus wins as he made us clean by his perfect service. Amen.