

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
13:6-15

6. Then he came to Simon Peter, and Peter said to him, Lord, are you washing my feet? 7. Jesus answered and said to him, What I am doing you do not understand now, but you shall understand hereafter. 8. 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. 9. Simon Peter said to him, Lord, not my feet only, but also *my* hands and *my* head! 10. Jesus said to him, He who is washed needs only to wash *his* feet, but is clean every whit; and ye are clean, but not all. 11. For he knew who should betray him; therefore he said, Ye are not all clean. 12. So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and sat down again, he said to them, Do ye know what I have done to you? 13. Ye call me Master and Lord, and ye say well, for *so* I am. 14. If I then, *your* Lord and Master, have washed your feet, ye also ought to wash one another's feet. 15. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.

6.--[*Then he came to Simon Peter.*] Whether our Lord began with Simon Peter is not quite clear from the words before us. The word "then," however, certainly does not mean "then" in the sense of "in order."

Chrysostom and Theophylact hold that Jesus washed Judas Iscariot's feet and then came to Peter. From the subsequent action of dipping and giving a morsel to Judas, it certainly seems probable that he sat very near our Lord.

Augustine holds that Jesus began with Peter. Bellarmine eagerly grasps at this and gives it as one of twenty-eight alleged proofs that Peter always had a primacy among the Apostles!

[*And Peter said to him.*] The word "Peter" is not in the Greek text here, but simply "he" or "that man." Our translators seem to have inserted it to make the meaning plain.

[*Lord, do you wash my feet?*] The English language here fails to give the full emphasis of the Greek. It would be literally rendered, "Do You, of me, wash the feet?" Such a one as You are, wash the feet of such a one as I am! It is like John the Baptist's exclamation when our Lord came to his baptism: "Come thou to me?" (Matt. 3:14.)

7.--[*Jesus answered and said, etc.*] The famous saying of this verse stretches far beyond the literal application of the words. Primarily, of course, it means, "This action of mine has a meaning which in a few minutes I will explain and you will understand, though at present it may seem to you strange and unsuitable." But in every age true Christians have seen a higher, deeper, broader meaning in the words, and a pious mind cannot doubt that they were intended to bear that meaning. It supplies the key to many things that we cannot understand in the providential government of the

world, in the history of the Church, in the events of our own lives. We must make up our minds to see many things happening which we do not know and understand now, and of which we cannot at present see the wisdom. But we must believe that "we shall know hereafter" the full purposes, the why and wherefore and needs-be of each and all. It is a golden sentence to store up in our memories. God's eternal counsels, the wisdom of the great Head of the Church, must never be forgotten. All is going on well, even when we think all is going on ill. When we cannot see it, we must believe. In sickness, sorrow, bereavement, disappointment, we must summon up faith and patience and hear Christ saying to us, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you shall understand hereafter."

Musculus has some happy remarks here on the applicability of this expression to infant baptism, which are most just and true.

8.--[*Peter said...never wash my feet.*] Here, again, the English version fails to give the full strength of the Greek words. This sentence would be rendered literally, "You shall never wash my feet forever," or unto eternity.

We may note here, in Peter's language, that there is such a thing as "a voluntary humility" which runs into extremes.

Hutcheson remarks: "Men may have much seeming humility in the matters of God which is yet but preposterous and sinful and learned from carnal reason." Rollock compares with Peter's conduct here the Romish worship of saints and angels under the pretense of deep humility and unworthiness to approach God.

[*Jesus answered...not wash you...no part with me.*] We need not doubt that this sentence was meant to bear a deep and full meaning and to reach far beyond the primary application. It would be a very cold and tame exposition to say that our Lord only meant, "Unless your feet are washed by Me tonight, you are not one of my disciples." It means a great deal more. Our Lord seems in effect to say, "You will not be wise to object to the symbolic action which I am performing. Remember, no one can be saved or have any part in Me and my work of redemption unless I wash away his sins. Except I wash away your many sins, even you, Simon Peter, have no part in Me. I must wash every saved soul, and every saved soul must be washed. Surely, therefore, it does not become you to object to my doing an instructive and figurative act to your feet when I must needs do a far greater work to your soul."

The sentence is one of wide, deep, and sweeping application. It is true of every Christian of every rank and position. To each one Christ says, "If I wash you not, you have no part in Me." It is not enough that we are Churchmen, professed communicants, and the like. The great question for everyone is this: "Am I washed and justified?"

The common assertion that this "washing" here spoken of is baptism seems to be unwarrantable. Our Lord never baptized anyone, so far as we can learn from Scripture. Where is it said that He baptized Peter? Moreover, if baptism were meant, the past tense would have been used: "If I had not

washed you, you would have no part in Me." The washing here spoken of is something far above baptism.

9.--[*Simon Peter said, etc.*] The exclamation of Peter in this verse is highly characteristic of the man. Impulsive, excitable, zealous, ardent, with more love than knowledge and more feeling than spiritual discernment, he is horrified at the very idea of "having no part in Christ." Anything rather than that! Not seeing clearly the deep meaning of His Master's words, and still sticking to a carnal, literal interpretation of the word "washing," he cries out that his Master may wash him all over, hands and head as well as feet, if an interest in Christ depends on that.

Great zeal and love are perfectly consistent with great spiritual ignorance and dulness, and great slowness to comprehend spiritual truth.

Rollock remarks that Peter erred as much in one extreme now as he had erred before in another.

Stier remarks that the passionate, strong expression of Peter in this verse is just the language of a warm-hearted but dull-minded disciple just beginning to understand, as if light had suddenly flashed on him.

10.--[*Jesus said to him, He who is washed, etc.*] This sentence of our Lord's conveys a latent rebuke of Peter's spiritual dulness. It is as though Jesus said, "The washing of head and hands of which you speak is not needed. Even assuming that a literal washing is all I meant in saying, 'If I wash you not,' it is well known that he who is washed needs only to wash his feet after a journey, and is accounted clean entirely after such a partial washing. But this is far more true of the washing of pardon and justification. He who is pardoned and justified by Me is entirely washed from all his sins and only needs the daily forgiveness of the daily defilement he contracts in traveling through a sinful world. Once washed, justified, and accepted by Me, ye are clean before God--although not all of you. There is one painful exception."

The great practical truth contained in this sentence ought to be carefully noted and treasured up by all believers. Once joined to Christ and cleansed in His blood, they are completely absolved and free from all spot of guilt and are counted without blame before God. But for all this, they need every day, as they walk through this world, to confess their daily failures and to sue for daily pardon. They require, in short, a daily washing of their feet over and above the great washing of justification, which is theirs the moment they first believe. He who neglects this daily washing is a very questionable and doubtful kind of Christian. Luther remarks pithily, "The devil allows no Christian to reach heaven with clean feet all the way."

"Every whit," in this verse, means literally "the whole man."

The deep mine of meaning that often lies under the surface of our Lord's language is strikingly exemplified in this verse, as well as in the seventh and eighth. There is far more in many of His sayings, we may believe, than has ever yet been discovered.

It is striking to observe that even of His poor, weak, erring disciples, Jesus says "Ye are clean."

Bullinger observes that the words of the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses," are a daily confession of the very thing here mentioned--the need of daily washing of our feet.

Casaubon remarks that those who come out of a bath, as a matter of constant experience, only need to wash their feet which, stepping on the ground as they come out, must needs contract some defilement. In eastern countries where bathing was very common, all could see the force of this.

Hengstenberg remarks that "the expression 'but not all' was intended to pierce the conscience of Judas, whom the Redeemer did not give up until the last good impulse died within him."

The common idea that the "washing" here spoken of refers to the baptism, seems to me quite untenable. He who is washed must mean only "washed in a spiritual sense from his sins;" as Psalm 51:4. Hengstenberg's discussion of the point is worth reading.

Burton observes, "The traitor, Judas, though washed by the hands of Christ Himself, was filthy still."

11.--[*For he knew who should betray him, etc.*] Our Lord's perfect foreknowledge of His sufferings and the manner of them, and His thorough discernment of the real characters of all His disciples, are alike shown in this verse. He did not suffer because he did not foresee it and was taken by surprise. He walked up to death knowing every step he was about to tread.

The sentence is an example of the explanatory glosses which are so characteristic of St. John's Gospel.

The Greek words rendered "who should betray Him" are literally, "the person betraying Him," in the past participle.

12.--[*So after...feet.*] After the conversation between our Lord and Peter, the washing seems to have gone on without interruption. The disciples were accustomed to see their Master do things they did not understand, and they submitted in silence.

[*And had taken...sat down again.*] This refers to His putting on again the long loose outer robe, which was laid aside on performing any action requiring exertion in the East. Then our Lord took His place once more at the table and commenced a discourse that seems to have ushered in the Lord's Supper. Whether the washing of the feet was meant, among other things, to teach the need of special preparation for that blessed ordinance, is an interesting thought and worth consideration. It certainly seems our Lord's last *action* before He gave the bread and wine.

[*He said, Do ye know what I have done to you?*] This question was meant to

stir up in the disciples' minds inquiry as to the meaning of what they had just seen. Understanding and intelligent perception of all we do in religion should be sought after and valued by all true Christians. There is no real religion in blind devotion. "What do I mean by this service?" should be the question often impressed on our minds.

13.--[*Ye call me Master and Lord.*] These words would be more literally rendered, "Ye call Me, or speak of Me, as the Master and the Lord." The expression seems to show that this was the habitual language of the disciples while our Lord was on earth. So Martha says to Mary, "The Master is come" (John 11:28).

[*Ye say well, for so I am.*] The word "so" is not in the Greek. It is simply, "for I am." The expression is a beautiful warrant for applying to Jesus especially the appellation "the Lord." He has Himself endorsed it by the words "Ye say well."

14.--[*If I then, your Lord, etc.*] The argument of this verse is one which our Lord very frequently uses: "If I do a thing, much more ought ye to do it." Literally rendered the meaning is, "If I, the Person whom ye speak of as 'the Lord' and 'the Master,' have washed your feet and condescended to perform the most menial act of attention to you, ye also ought to feel it a duty to do acts of the same kind for one another--acts as condescending as washing one another's feet."

The words "Your Lord and Master" in the Greek are literally "The Lord and the Master."

"Ye ought" is a very strong expression. It is tantamount to saying, "It is your duty and debt--ye are under an obligation to do it."

Paley in Evidences, p. 2, ch. 4, has a remarkable passage showing the close affinity between our Lord's conduct here and His conduct when taking a little child and putting him in the midst of the disciples. In both he taught humility, that rare grace, by action.

15.--[*For I have given you an example, etc.*] "I have, in my own person, given you a pattern of what your own conduct should be. The duty I want you to learn is of such vast importance that I have not left it to a general precept but have given you an example of my meaning."

Of course, the question at once rises, What did our Lord really mean? Did he mean that we all ought literally to do the very same thing that He did? Or did he only mean that we are to imitate the spirit of this action?

The Church of Rome, it is well known, puts a literal sense on our Lord's language. Once every year, about Easter, the head of the Romish Church publicly washes the feet of certain poor persons got ready for the occasion. The absurdity, to say the least, of this view is evident on a moment's reflection.

It seems absurd to take our Lord's words literally and to suppose that the Pope's literal washing of a few feet at Easter can supersede the duty of

all Christians to do the same. Yet it is only fair to remember that the Moravians to this day take a literal view of those words and have a custom called "pedilavium."

It is, in any case, absurd to suppose that our Lord would require His disciples to perform a duty which the young and the feeble would be physically unable to do.

It is inconsistent with the general tenor of our Lord's teaching to suppose that He would ever attach so much importance to a mere bodily action. "Bodily exercise profits little" (1 Tim. 4:8). A formal performance of bodily acts of religion is just the easiest thing that can be imposed on people. The thing that is really hard, and yet always required, is the service of the heart.

The true interpretation of the two verses is that which places a spiritual sense on our Lord's words. It is a practical illustration of Matthew 20:26-28. He wished to teach His disciples that they ought to be willing to wait on one another, serve one another, minister to one another even in the least and lowest things. They should think nothing too low, or humble, or menial to undertake if they can show love, kindness, and condescension to another. If He, the King of kings, condescended to leave heaven to save souls and dwell 31 years in this sin-defiled world, there is nothing that we should think too lowly to undertake.

Pride, because we possess wealth, rank, position, place, education, or high-breeding, is condemned heavily in this passage. He who would shrink from doing the least kindness to the poorest Christian has read these verses to little purpose and does not copy his Master's example.

One caution only we must remember. Let us not suppose that an ostentatious attention to the poor constitutes the whole of obedience to the law of this passage. It is easy work comparatively to care for the poor. We are to be ready to do the least acts of kindness to our equals quite as much as to the poor. There is nothing about temporal poverty in the passage. The disciples were told their duty to "one another." This is a very important point. It is much easier and more self-satisfying to play the part and do the work of a Christian to the poor than to our equals.

How entirely the passage overthrows the claim of mere talking, head-learned professors of sound doctrine to be accounted true Christians, it is needless to show. Doctrinal orthodoxy without practical love and humility is utterly worthless before God.

Bullinger remarks how singularly full of Christian truth the passage is which ends at this verse. That we are washed clean from all sins by Christ our Savior, that although washed the remainder of infirmity sticks to us and obliges us to wash our feet daily, that the duty of a disciple is to make Christ his example in all things--these three great lessons stand forth most prominently.

Gurnall observes, "The master here does not only rule the scholar's book for him, but writes him a copy with his own hand."