

## **Wasted? The radical values of Jesus “A waste of Energy?”**

Passages: John 13:1–17  
James 5:19–20

From a standing position: Stoop down, drawn in, lift up! That, in a nutshell, is what I want you to learn from today’s passage in John 13. These are the values of Jesus!

You see, in this thirteenth chapter of his gospel, the apostle John records a somewhat strange and curious ritual...one that Jesus Christ performed on the very last night of His life– **the washing of His disciples' feet**. I call it strange and curious because it was a ritual that none of the other three gospel writers ever mention. Even more curious is the fact that, while the other three Gospels focus a great deal of attention on the institution of the Lord’s supper, John says very little about this meal. Indeed, it almost seems as if this act of foot–washing is far more significant to John; as if the meal was but a minor background detail to it.

Why would John do this? It's important to remember that John’s was the last Gospel to be written. Perhaps he was simply filling in some of the stories that the other Gospel writers left out. But I think there is more to it than this! John, you see, was a theologian. It is highly likely, then, that John saw the foot–washing story as an essential theological link between the awesome work of Christ in His life, death, and resurrection and the establishment of His new people, the church. Clearly, John could see that the value–system that Jesus was displaying as He washed His disciples' feet was **even more theologically important** than the Lord's Supper!

You see, the physical act of washing someone’s feet expressed three dominant aspects of Jesus value–system: **Humility, hospitality and honour**.

1. Stoop down: To wash someone’s feet is an expression of deep **humility** before that person. The foot–washer must

kneel; he/she must humble themselves; they must take the position of servant; they must willingly accept this lowest form of servanthood. Jesus displayed this humility when He washed His disciples' feet.

2. Draw in/embrace: To wash someone's feet expresses your **hospitality** towards that person. (Gen 18:4; Gen 24:32; Gen 43:24; I Sa 25:41). Throughout the Middle Eastern world, to wash someone's feet was to welcome them into your home (although, as a home-owner, you would rarely do it yourself. You would get a servant to do it on your behalf!) As the host of this Passover Meal, Jesus was showing the depth of hospitality He felt towards His disciples as He personally washed their feet.
3. Lift up: To wash someone's feet expresses the depth of **honour and esteem** in which you hold your guest! Remember how, back in John 12, Mary poured costly perfume on Jesus' feet and dried them with her hair? She did this to honour Jesus as her Lord and Master. Now, it was time for Jesus to do the same thing to His disciples—to honour them as the ones who would carry the Gospel into all the world after His departure.

What is important to see, here, is that these three values are, in fact, **divine in nature**! As Jesus washes the disciples' feet, He is displaying the face of God towards humanity! Here (on the night before the world rejects Him, beats Him and crucifies Him), Jesus makes it clear that these 3 divine values of **humility, hospitality** and **honour** are the epitome of everything that God is towards the world! God is humble towards us; God is hospitable towards us; God even honours us!

What's more; because God is this way **towards us**, Jesus insists that this is the way we must be **towards each other**! Jesus, thus,

calls His disciples to display these values in everything they do and say: **"You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. "**

Indeed, not only did Jesus believe that these three divine values of **humility, hospitality** and **honour** were essential attributes of being a disciple, but so did Peter, James, John and Paul as they wrote their own epistles! Each of them turned around and encouraged the next generation of disciples to emulate Christ in these 3 areas: **"Humble yourselves!" "Show hospitality to one another!" "Honour others above yourselves!"** Their obvious stress on these three divine values came because they saw these as essential and practical elements of love: Love is humble; Love is hospitable; Love is honourable! (John 13:35-- **"By this will all men know that you are my disciples if you love one another!"**)

Having said that, I'm convinced that there must be something more going on in this strange ritual of foot washing than a simple lesson in how to love! I say that because (in a heated exchange between Jesus and Peter) Jesus makes it clear that this physical act of washing feet has, for those with eyes to see, a far deeper significance. **Look at verses 6-11.** When Jesus comes around to wash Peter's feet, Peter begins to resist. **"Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"** Then in verse 8, Peter categorically refuses to let Jesus wash his dirty feet. **"No",** says Peter, **"you shall never wash my feet."** To this, Jesus calmly replies, **"Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."** The intensity of this exchange, coupled with the ultimatum, **"Unless",** indicates that there is far more to this exercise of foot-washing than meets the eye!

Although Jesus is offering Himself as a model of **humility, hospitality and honour**, this simple act of foot-washing is also about cleansing; a **divine cleansing that comes from divine forgiveness; a divine cleansing that will result in the washing away of sin, guilt, remorse and self-loathing!**

Think about it: Jesus is taking the smelliest and dirtiest part of His disciples' bodies (their feet) and using them as a metaphor to say to them; **"Unless you allow me to touch the deepest parts of your being...the dirty parts where you keep all your secrets and lies; unless you allow me to wash those parts of you, you can have no part with me!"**

In the end, this is the minimum requirement for anyone who wants to be a disciple of Jesus—"Unless..."—you **must** make yourself vulnerable; you must expose your dirty linen to the One who holds the only soap that can wash it clean!

Of course, at the heart of this metaphorical act of washing feet are these 3 divine values of **humility, hospitality and honour**, taken to their greatest height as they point ahead to the cross! It will be on the cross where God show His greatest **humility** as He stoops down before the dirty feet of humanity; and it will be from the cross that God will draw in all humanity, offering the world greatest expression of divine **hospitality**, particularly to those who have gone astray...even those who have crucified Him; and it will be through the cross that God will **honour**, esteem...lift up... even the worst of sinners by elevating them to their pre-Fall position as His vice-regents over creation.

John was right! Jesus' act of cleansing His disciples' feet is a theological precursor to the greatest act of 'foot-washing' ever seen on this earth—when, in only a few days, Jesus will cleanse the world of sin by His death on the cross!

So then, what did Jesus mean when He said, **"If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash**

**one another's feet.** " (John 13:14) If Jesus was using this ceremonial foot-washing as a way of speaking about God's cosmic plan to cleanse the world of sin by dying on the cross, then, surely, there's more to our job of washing each other's feet than physically emulating the divine attributes of humility, hospitality and honour. I mean, at the heart of Jesus' call to wash each others' feet is the call to emulate Him **in the way he forgave!** How? It is a call to live out the greatest expression of God's humility, hospitality and honour by constantly offering that same forgiveness to those who would crucify us! (We know that, as Jesus was being crucified, Jesus prayed, **"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!"** )

But is this really possible? Is it possible for mere mortals, like us, to forgive like God?

Jesus obviously thinks so! But, of course, as with every aspect of the Gospel, it is only God who can make it possible in us! You see, it is only as we enter into the arms of the Triune God of grace and receive His forgiveness that we can turn around and forgive others! The divine grace of God that, in Christ, stooped down, welcomed and lifted up the entire world in forgiveness is the same grace that continues to stoop down, embrace us and raise us up into a new life with Him. Only from this place, of being **"seated with Christ in the heavenly realms"**, does divine forgiveness flow through us as His human agents.

And of course, this means that, at first, we may not be able to forgive the wrongs that have been done to us. Indeed, it may take a long time before the healing balm of Christ's love has adequately dealt with our wounds so that we might be able to forgive those who have, particularly, done horrible things to us. Miroslav Volf, himself a victim of the long, drawn-out war in Bosnia, speaks of a woman to whom terrible things were done. As a victim of the most horrendous humiliation, Volf tries to imagine what her road to forgiveness will look like: "A person (like this) with a shattered life doesn't first need Christ to forgive her or to

forgive through her. Before anything else, she needs Christ to cradle her, to nurse her with the milk of divine love, to hold her in His arms like an inestimable gem, to sing her songs of gentle care and protection, and to restore her to herself as a beloved and treasured being.”

Before we can stoop down, embrace and lift up others, we must allow Christ to come and hold us, and comfort us, and absorb our pain into Himself. (Or to use today’s metaphor, we must allow Jesus to wash our feet!) Only as we give in to His love and bathe in His forgiveness will we gain the perspective necessary to love and forgive others. It is, in fact, a process of entering into the death and resurrection of Jesus where an entirely new perspective on human life is forged. When His death is understood as our death and His resurrection as our resurrection, then we will be able to proclaim with the Apostle Paul, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” Only then can Christ’s values of humility, hospitality and honour be lived out in me, even towards the ones who have greatly sinned against me! **“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!”**

Only in this way can the divine value–system become my value–system, as, by the Spirit of Christ, I increasingly participate in the life of Christ.

This idea ties in neatly to the words that Jesus speaks as a conclusion to this passage. After commanding His disciples to wash each other’s feet, Jesus adds; **“If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.”** (John 13:17)

Now, of course, in a psychological sense, it is true that grudges, hate, anger, and lack of forgiveness do nothing but shackle us and hinder our spiritual growth. They will eventually destroy us. By forgiving those who have done things against us, we unlock our shackles and release ourselves from the bonds of animosity. Forgiveness leads to inner peace and true happiness.

But, this is only a small part of what Jesus is saying here! For the true blessing of God only comes by experiencing His presence in our lives! That is ultimately what Jesus is pointing to! And so, to wash another person's feet by forgiving them totally from the heart is a means for us to grow in the presence of God—to join Him and participate with Him in the one thing that He does best: Stooping down, drawing in and lifting up the world in forgiveness!

This is what Jesus meant when He said to His disciples, "**If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.**" Blessed are you as you share in the value-system of God and align yourself more and more closely with His true nature!

**So, like Him, let us: stoop down, draw in, lift up!  
It is never a waste of energy!**

Let's pray.