

THE SHALLOW SERVANTS AND THE SERVING SAVIOR

John 13:4-5

By Raymond White

Why did Jesus wash his disciples' feet at the last supper? To understand what happened and why, we need to flash back to some earlier events.

Matthew 19:27** Peter said unto him [Jesus], **We have forsake all and followed thee: what shall we have?:28** Jesus said, **ye shall sit upon twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

That was a tremendous promise, and a beautiful one. The problem was, they couldn't leave well enough alone, two of them, James and John, wanted privileged positions.

***Matthew 20:20** Then came to him the mother of Zebedee's children with her sons, worshipping him and desiring a certain thing of him. **:21** Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand and the other on thy left, in thy kingdom.*

Oh dear. It was not enough to be judges in the eternal court, James and John wanted the two best seats. If there are six seats on the king's right hand and six seats on his left, then the two best seats are those next to the king. That's what James and John wanted. They didn't have courage enough to ask Jesus themselves so they enlisted their mommy to do it for them.

Jesus tried to be civil and beg off, ***Matthew 20:23** ...to sit on my right hand and on my left is not mine to give...*, but the damage was done. That they had asked at all created a conflict. ***Matthew 20:24** And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation with the two brethren.*

Maybe the rest were mad because they didn't think of it first. In any case this bickering continued to the last supper. ***Luke 22:24** And there was also a strife among them, which of them should be accounted the greatest.*

Jesus explained to them as gently and as lovingly as he could, ***Luke 22:25** ...The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them...:26* But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doeth serve.

Maybe his reasoning moved them or maybe it didn't. Whichever, Jesus felt the need to take an action which shamed them. We know it shamed them because of Peter's reaction. Here's what happened.

The streets were generally dirt roads and people generally wore sandals, so their feet were generally dirty. And so when you came in, the first thing you had to do was clean your feet so you didn't track a mess through the house. Today we leave welcome mats at our front doors for the purpose of knocking dirt off our shoes before stepping in. That's the sort of thing in view here.

For rich people, they had it easy. Feet were washed by slaves. It was a demeaning job, washing feet, an act of submission. Nobody wanted to wash someone else's feet.

What the twelve disciples were probably bickering about was just that: who is going to wash whose feet now that they had come in to dinner. "John, wash my feet." "No, Peter, you wash mine." Everyone wanted to be high on the pecking order, no one on the bottom.

That's when he did it. Quietly, ignoring the din —

John 13:4 *He raiseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself. :5 After that he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with a towel wherewith he was girded.*

They were stunned, and speechless. No one wanted him to do this but they were too embarrassed and humiliated to object, until, that is, Jesus arrived at Peter.

John 13:8 *Peter saith unto him, Thou shalt never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me. :9 Simon Peter saith unto him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head. :10 Jesus saith to him, He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all. :11 For he knew who should betray him... :15 For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.*

They finally got the message. Peter sure did. As humiliating as it may be, you have to let your superior serve you, you have to allow Jesus to give to you that free gift of forgiveness and cleanness that he offers, and recognize that you desperately need it.

Peter understood that immediately and said, “Okay, Lord, give me a bath!”

What Peter didn't see (and we often fail to see) is that he was already clean, he didn't need a bath. Only his feet were dirty. When Jesus cleansed us, we became clean for life. Once did the job. But we have to trudge through the dirty streets of life and our feet get dirty. It can't be helped. That's life. But that's okay. Once a week we meet together, have the sacrament or communion that Jesus is about to share with his disciples, and we get spiritually renewed. Jesus cleansed us once, but he continually knocks the dirt off our feet so that we're able to face another week.

We don't need to take a spiritual bath, get baptized, get converted over and over. Once was enough. But life is full of dirt, and it clings. But Jesus keeps our feet clean, if we let him. And that is what we are to do for each other. We are to stop bickering about whose the greatest and get down on our knees and serve. That's the real mark of greatness.

There is a warning, however. Mingling with and traveling with the disciples and even have his feet washed by Jesus did not make Judas clean. He did need a spiritual bath and never took it. There is a point where all the ritual and all the claim of devotion have to become genuine. Peter was already clean though he didn't know it. Judas never was. Peter's is the example to follow.