

## **Sermon For The Thursday Before Easter**

### **Jesus Washes The Feet Of His Disciples.**

Source: Martin Luther, "Sermon for the Thursday Before Easter," Matthias Loy, ed., *Dr. Martin Luther's House-Postil, or, Sermons on the Gospels for the Sundays and Principal Festivals of the Church Year*. Volume 2. Two Volumes. Second Edition. (Columbus, Ohio; J. A. Schulze, 1884), pp. 24-41. Translation by Prof. E. Smid.

*During those times, emotions were very heated, which was reflected in the writings of all the parties to these disagreements. Such comments belong to those times, and not to ours, and they are therefore excised from this copy. The omitted portions are indicated by use of ellipses, i.e., " ... "*

#### **John 13, 1-17**

Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that His hour was come that He should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end. And supper being ended, the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray Him; Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He was come from God, and went to God; He riseth from supper, and laid aside His garments; and took a towel, and girded Himself. After that He poureth water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith He was girded. Then cometh He to Simon Peter: and Peter saith unto Him, Lord, dost Thou wash my feet? Jesus answered and said unto him, What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter. Peter saith unto Him, Thou shalt never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me. Simon Peter saith unto Him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head. 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. For He knew who should betray Him; therefore said He, Ye are not all clean. So after He had washed their feet, and had taken His garments, and was set down again, He said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.

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**J**ohn is the only Evangelist who mentions the incident of the washing of the feet of the disciples by Christ; hence it might seem that this occurrence was of but little importance. John, however, introduces it with so much minuteness and care, that we cannot but believe that Christ intended to teach an important lesson by it; for after its performance He admonishes His disciples to observe this example and to wash each others' feet. Hence many Christians still continue this practice. ...

The first part of the narrative, as John gives it, appears somewhat peculiar. He begins thus: "When Jesus knew that His hour was come that He should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end." Now, what has all this to do with the washing of feet? How can these words be made to harmonize with the rest of the story? These questions can easily and fully be answered, if we but earnestly consider the whole account. When the Evangelist tells us that Jesus knew that His hour was now at hand to depart from this world unto the Father, he wishes thereby to awaken within us a lively attention to this deed and the lessons which it contains; for this washing of feet happened nearly in the last hour before Christ's departure from this world. Now it is certain that we remember and cherish the last wishes of our dying friends more earnestly and dutifully than any other of their words and deeds; for when it comes to dying, pleasantries and jestings are at an end, and the words then spoken are full of sincerity and earnestness.

St. John would therefore tell us: Listen, you shall hear a story and a lesson important, and well to be remembered; you shall hear of the last deed of Christ and of His final admonition to His disciples, which He began at the washing of their

feet and concluded upon His way to the Mount of Olives. These circumstances impress us with the great importance of the incident recorded in our text; for, surely, if it were of a trifling kind, it would not have occurred in this solemn hour of anxiety and peril.

Again, we must bear in mind that John refers to the "love" which the Lord manifested towards His disciples, in order that we may learn, from this washing of feet, the great condescension of Christ to men, yea, even unto us. Hence we assert the great importance of this incident for the following reasons: It occurred just before His death, and in it He exhibited His great love and condescension. "We, therefore, must not slight this deed and its admonition: for when love and mercy prompts the Lord to action, His deeds can not be insignificant.

St. John further exalts this subject when he says: Jesus loved His own which were in the world, that is, the time has now come for the Lord to depart from His disciples, who, while yet in the world, have need of such an example and admonition, lest they be tempted and yield to the allurements of the world. The children of this world are selfish; each one thinks only of himself and his own welfare, no matter how the others may fare. Christ would teach us, by His own example, how we should act towards each other, and avoid this mean selfishness, which is so prevalent. He is the Lord over all, yet He humbles Himself and even becomes a servant to His disciples. Let us learn humility from Him, that we may not fall into the sin of selfishness, but know how to avoid it and be happy.

The Evangelist intentionally records the fact that the devil prompted Judas to betray the

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Lord, and wishes thereby to teach us, that the Apostles and all Christians are subject not only to the allurements of the world, but are also directly influenced by the devil to selfishness, arrogance and pride. The only available remedy against this evil is to follow the example of Christ, who, just at the eve of His betrayal into the hands of the heathens, gave us yet such an illustrious proof of humility and condescension as is recorded in the incident of the washing of the feet of His disciples.

"To be in the world" means really to be in the midst of devils. It is therefore impossible for us to conduct ourselves aright unless we follow the precepts of the word of God and also this example of Christ. The flesh is averse to all self-denial, and would ever prefer its own supremacy. To counteract such inclination, the Lord gives us here an example to be remembered and followed. He is filled with true love toward us, and desires to protect us from sin and shame.

The introductory words of the Evangelist to the narrative of the washing of feet are therefore very valuable; they teach us the love and care of Christ toward His people. And yet this account, though read and chanted a thousand times and more, in many a convent and cathedral, is not appreciated nor understood.

But let us proceed. "What is the meaning of the words: "Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He was come from God, and went to God?" These are important words, indicating the thoughts of our Lord previous to the washing of feet. He evidently did not then meditate upon His approaching passion, nor did He at that time feel sad, as was the case soon after; but He thought of His glory which He

had with the Father from all eternity, and which He would now again assume as to His human nature. Such thoughts were sublime, and might well have absorbed His entire attention, to the utter exclusion of the world and every mortal therein.

But even now, while meditating upon His divine glory, He arises suddenly from the table, throws off His outer garment, takes a towel, girds Himself, pours water into a basin, washes the feet of His disciples, and wipes them with the towel wherewith He was girded.

Consider well His thoughts and His deed. Who knows and thinks of it that He is Lord God over all; that in less than one day the devil shall have accomplished what he can, and that thereafter all His enemies shall be vanquished and His Christians be at ease. Now turn to His deed, and what is it? Why, this very Lord performs now a task which is commonly done by the servants of the house; He washes the feet of His disciples.

Christ desires us to learn from this occurrence to humiliate ourselves, and not to abuse our position and our power by insolence and arrogance toward our fellow-men, but to help and to serve them with our means as much as we can, even as He Himself, the Lord of glory, became humble and of low estate, yea, even the servant of His disciples. Jesus Himself explains the meaning of the feet-washing when He says: "Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, the servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent

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greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them." Here we see what this feet-washing really means, and that this story is told us that we might imitate its precepts with care and diligence.

... Christ does not mean the outward act when He says: "Ye also ought to wash one another's feet;" for He immediately explains this in the words: "I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, the servant is not greater than his lord." These words are plain enough. If we are honored on account of our position in life, we ought to remain humble and serve our inferiors with such gifts as they do not possess. In full accordance with this, the Lord afterwards gives His mandate concerning love when He says: "A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another." Now the true nature of love is humility and charity, kindness and compassion. When Christ commands the washing of feet, He requires the presence of such a love. It is evident that our Lord, by His action in the Gospel, did not intend to teach us the outward washing of feet, which is done by means of water; for then it would be obligatory to wash the feet of all; or rather, which would certainly be more serviceable, to prepare a regular bath for the people, in which they could wash their whole body. This of course cannot be the meaning of Christ's command in this regard. He simply gave us by His example an important lesson, that we should be humble, and properly employ the gifts and graces which we have, to the advantage of our brethren, and that we should despise no one, but rather excuse the shortcomings of our fellow-men, and help them to become better.

In this sense, washing of feet must be practiced not merely upon this day, but every day of our life, and we must not grow weary in well-doing towards our fellow-men. For such a purpose, and for such feet-washing, Christ set us the example which we are now considering. Let us remember this.

Those whom God has endowed with much wisdom and honor, and who are called to the office of the ministry, should be especially intent on practicing zealously this feet-washing, that they may not become guilty of abusing the gifts and authority which they have, but employ them faithfully to the service and welfare of the Church. For if our Lord and Saviour, who well knew that the time of exaltation into His eternal kingdom of majesty and grace was approaching, yet humbled Himself so low that in obedience to His Father's will He gave Himself for us into death, even the death of the cross, how much rather do we poor creatures need such humiliation, we who are tempted by the devil day and night, and who are in constant danger of falling into the meshes of pride, avarice and self-esteem! The devil knows full well that he has gained the field, and is not injured by all our preaching, if we as servants of the Church forget the command of Christ to be humble, and if we seek after temporal honor and authority.

[Anytime church leaders turn their attention to attaining worldly glory and power, and neglect their spiritual charges, the Church will decay. When this happens,] the devil succeeded in setting aside the word of God and the true worship, substituting therefor falsehoods and idolatries, which were very lucrative and conducive to the aggrandizement of the priesthood.

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I believe that Christ, when he exhibited such humility in washing the feet of His disciples, had in mind the great corruption which, on account of the selfishness and pride of the clergy, would creep into His Church in later years. This great evil began to manifest itself soon after; the bishops wrangled with each other about their relative superiority ... This I call a fine way of being humble and of washing feet, after the example which our Lord has given us. Yes, great humility, forsooth!

It was so even then. Judas was not affected by the ceremony of feet-washing, nor by the solemn words of Christ; he meditated all the while how he could betray his Master and get the thirty pieces of silver. The Lord knew this, and was sad on account of such depravity, as the Evangelist tells us. He well knew that Judas was not the only miscreant in this respect, but that he would have a great multitude of followers, who would all be ready to betray and deny their Lord, if they could thereby but obtain the coveted pieces of silver. The knowledge of this fact causes sorrow and pain to the Saviour. He is filled with love and compassion towards all, and is ready to sacrifice His own life for their eternal happiness, and yet Judas and his horde of disciples care naught for this. They confess that Christ was meek and lowly, that especially by the act of feet-washing He showed His humility and love, but still they will not do as He did; ...

We ought not to be such disciples of Judas, but should ever remember that we are not preachers or officers of the Church to show our dignity and to be great lords, but to do our duty faithfully and humbly for the welfare of the Church. Thus will we benefit our fellow-men with the gifts which we have, and will be engaged in

the proper feet-washing; we will also, in this way, fulfill the command of Christ to His pleasure and honor, and will be enabled to resist more successfully the wiles and snares of the evil one.

The devil makes it his especial aim to render preachers and those engaged in the service of the Church proud and selfish; and if he is successful in this attempt, he has won the contest. They will then be so engaged in temporal matters that Christ, His word, His Church, and their pastoral office, will become of secondary importance to them, or will, perhaps, be entirely forgotten. Examples of such men are plenty, even now.

Let no one think himself exempt from such temptation, but rather practice more zealously than before the virtue of feet-washing. Even St. Paul says: "There was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure." If it was so with the Apostle, how much more are we poor Christians, to whom God has given such high offices, in danger of self-exaltation ! Let us take care, therefore, and employ well the various talents which God has granted us; let us exercise pure humility, imitating Christ who, with towel in hand, arises from the table to wash the feet of others, who thinks not first of Himself, but how He may be of service to His brethren.

We are therefore justified in applying this incident of our text chiefly to those who occupy positions of an official kind in the Church, instructing them how sedulously to perform their duties, and how important it is for them to remain in a state of humility. God called them into their various offices, not on their own account, but to benefit their fellow-Christians. It is their duty

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faithfully to serve their brethren, and not to complain if their task is perilous and hard.

But all Christians, no matter what their position in life is, should have this spirit of humility. Kings and emperors, though their office is of a secular kind, if they are true Christians, must wash the feet of their people. God did not give them such a high position to live in luxury, lasciviousness and lawlessness, but to make use of their talents for the benefit of their subjects. They should see to it, first of all, that the word of God is preached in their land by faithful ministers, and that idolatry and disturbances of the true worship of God are not allowed. They are accountable to God for the performance of this duty, and cannot expect the divine blessing to rest upon them or their children, unless they are faithful to their trust. How could God be a friend and ally of those who care nothing for His word, or who force their people into public idolatry and into false devotions ?

Again, this feet-washing inculcates earnestness, trustworthiness and zeal in the administration of temporal governments. Rulers must not revel day and night, indulge in the chase and in sports, and inconsiderately oppress the people; it is, on the contrary, their duty to promote peace and happiness throughout the land, to defend the inhabitants against domestic and foreign enemies, and to enforce equal rights to all. If kings and rulers would only practice this kind of feet-washing, it would keep them busy, not alone on this festive Thursday, but through the entire year; yea, it should keep them awake many a night, when others rest, who have not so great a responsibility upon themselves. They must attend to the affairs of Church and State, and thus have their hands

more than full, if they wish to do their part assiduously and well.

But what we said above in regard to Judas and [some church leaders] is also true in this connection. The real feet-washing is generally neglected, that is, the rulers disregard the true welfare of their people, and think they can satisfy them with feasts and public demonstrations, which however avail nothing. It is no great thing to wash one's own feet or those of a friend; but to enforce justice, to defend the truth in doctrine and public worship, is not every one's business, nor is every one capable of doing it, but only they whom God has called to such important offices.

In the lower vocations of life the same practice ought to prevail. The master and the mistress of a family wash the feet of their children and servants, if they treat them kindly and attentively, and if they bring them up in the fear of God and ready to do His will. Husband and wife wash each other's feet if they exercise a forbearing spirit towards each other, avoiding anger and inconsiderate scolding. Servants wash the feet of their employers if they are pious, honest, diligent and obedient, and if they receive even reprimands in a spirit of meekness, knowing that in the end they are benefited thereby.

In short, if you enjoy a peculiar blessing and gift, which your fellow-man has not, employ these to his benefit, no matter who you are or what your position in life may be. Be not arrogant, and despise not him who is less gifted than you are. This is the proper feet-washing which God commanded us to observe.

It is true, and you will find that it is, such feet-washing is not as easy as that sham observance of the custom, in which an abbot or a prior

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washes the feet of his monks, or in which a bishop performs this task for his chapter. There is no real humility in these cases; for they who wash the others seek their own honor thereby, and expect still greater homage from the recipients of their condescension. You must perform this task in a different sense and manner, by humbling yourself in such a way as to be ever ready to assist others who have not the gifts which you have. This will demand a precious victory over the old Adam within us, who seeks his own honor and exaltation, and is always more prepared to exercise vengeance and oppression than to do good toward others.

Again, we must understand by the term "feet-washing" a disposition which not only willingly serves others in a humble spirit, but which is also ready to forgive the failings of the brethren, as St. Paul says: "Bear ye one another's burdens." For it is simply a fact that in the wide world we will never find a Christian so blameless and perfect as to be entirely free from every fault and blemish. The one gives way to anger, the other is despondent and morose, the third too boisterous and frivolous, the fourth too niggardly and close, the fifth too free and easy. In one word, as even the heathens remarked: Each one has his load which others must help to bear.

We are often inclined to think: If only our neighbor had not this or that failing, we would gladly associate with him; but his many faults seem to us insufferable and repulsive. Let us bear in mind, whenever we observe such shortcomings in our husband, wife, child, servants, neighbors and others, that we have an excellent occasion for feet-washing. Let us do it then; that is, let us bear with mildness such infirmities, and seek to relieve others of them, always aware that this world is

really a filthy cesspool, which we cannot pass without soiling our feet. This happens to me and to you, and to every one. Should we therefore run away into deserts and solitudes, and associate with no one, as formerly the monks did? No, it is a Christian duty to wash the feet of others, we must stay where they are. We must be among the people who wade through unclean, filthy places. We must unbend our proud reserve, and though our feet should be clean and pretty, it behooves us to carry water, rags, soap and brush to cleanse and wash the feet of those who need such ablution.

To do this we must obey the word of the Apostle and "bear one another's burdens"; we must right willingly assist the weak and needy, exercise patience and compassion, give them our hand for a support, and instruct and guide them to a purer and better life. If we are prudent, wise and learned, we ought therefore not to despise the simple and silly, but should so much the more exercise our skill to help them and to improve their condition. If we are pious, chaste and temperate let us not judge others harshly who have not such virtues, but let us strive to turn them from their evil way and lead them to do what is right. If we have not the faults which we notice in our brother, let us thank God that it is so; but at the same time we must not forget that we may have other failings which need patience and assistance from others. On the other hand, our neighbors have gifts with which they can help us in our infirmities; and even if they should be unable to help us even in the least, they are still our neighbors, whom we should treat with Christian love, as God has commanded us. If we act thus, we may succeed in gaining him who otherwise is stubborn and perverse, unless he be like this Judas, so entirely possessed of the devil, that he will not heed our ad-

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vances. Let harmony and friendship prevail among us as much as possible, and to this end let us exercise the spirit of humility.

What a pleasant, quiet, Christian life we could lead, if we would only be ready ever to wash each other's feet! The one would assist and defend the other; we would all exercise patience and mildness and have no other aim but to make each other happy. Then might we be comforted by the assurance that we had, to some extent at least, complied with the command of Christ, and might appropriate the word of our Lord: "If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them." But if we are derelict in the performance of our duty in this regard, we will feel a piercing sting in our hearts and be unhappy people, devoid of grace and joy.

As we have said, this feet-washing is a bitter task for our old Adam. He desires the services of others, but will make no similar returns. He is also much offended if he finds no thanks for his favors. But we must continue the feet-washing, the well-doing toward others, though they prove ungrateful. To do this we need not only perseverance, but chiefly patience and humility, divine gifts which we must seek in earnest prayer.

From this we learn what this feet-washing means; it teaches an humble, friendly and Christ-like spirit, which Christians should, under all circumstances, manifest in their intercourse with each other. The Lord desires to direct our thoughts to the necessity of humility and condescension; therefore He performed this ceremony of feet-washing shortly before His death. No matter what our ability may be, we dare not boast on account of our great endowments, but must reason thus:

By giving us greater gifts than others, God meant that we should employ them in the service of others, and that we should cultivate so much the more a spirit of lowliness, and thrust the devil aside with his promptings to pride and arrogance. If we yield to him and become filled with self-esteem, we are lost; we are then no longer disciples of Jesus, but of Judas ...

The Lord, however, wishes to teach us, just here, another and more important lesson in regard to His person. When Peter refuses to be washed, Jesus answers him: "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me." In these words Christ refers not to the external washing of the feet, but to the washing from sin by His blood shed upon the cross, which washing still is efficacious among the believers in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. Such washing is no example; for we can cleanse neither ourselves nor others from sin. The Son of God, the Lamb of God, who bore the sins of the world, can do it, and He alone. They who are washed of Christ confess that God in mercy, through His Son, pardoned and forgave their sins, and therefore they are ready to forgive the wrong which others may have done unto them, as Christ teaches Matt. 18, and as we pray in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

It is therefore evident that we should practice this feet-washing during our whole life. Christ set us the example shortly before His death, and He did it through love of us, for He knew how we must dwell in an unclean world. May God grant us His Holy Spirit in Christ Jesus His Son, that we may ever bear in mind this admonition, and may fashion our life accordingly. Amen.