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# The Message of the Towel

*“During supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. So He came to Simon Peter. He said to Him, ‘Lord, do You wash my feet?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter.’ Peter said to Him, ‘Never shall You wash my feet!’ Jesus answered him, ‘If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.’ Simon Peter said to Him, ‘Lord, then wash not only my feet, but also my hands and my head.’ Jesus said to him, ‘He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.’ For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, ‘Not all of you are clean.’” (John 13:2–11).*

Luke implied that, shortly before our Lord arose to wash everyone’s feet, the apostles were arguing about who would be the greatest in the coming kingdom. He wrote, “And there arose also a dispute among them as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest” (Luke 22:24).

Jesus, hearing their conversation, answered them with pointed teaching regarding the meaning of greatness.

And He said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called ‘Benefactors.’ But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant. For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves” (Luke 22:25–27).

Although the exact chronology of what happened in that upper room may be somewhat in doubt, it is reasonable to conclude that our Lord arose after making these remarks on servanthood and gave the apostles a demonstration of what He meant.

Placing Himself in a role that a servant usually occupied, Jesus the Master arose, took off His outer robe, wrapped a towel around Himself, poured water from a pitcher into a small basin, and methodically knelt and moved from man to man, washing each one’s feet. The

apostles, shocked by what they were seeing, watched in thundering silence as He washed and dried each dusty foot.

The scene is historic! Who could have imagined it. The Son of God in the flesh, the great Messiah whom God had sent, was fulfilling the role of a common servant! The truth that was presented to the world in that moment should be carefully meditated upon, weighed thoughtfully in the heart, and emulated by every Christian.

*Here is the meaning of true humility.* The humble person loses himself in the greater ambition of doing God’s will. This great paragraph begins with a statement about Jesus’ being fully aware of His approaching death. John wrote, “Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end” (John 13:1). His Father’s will compelled Him to love those who had been given to Him to the fullest and to the end. His mind had quickly moved from the cross to comforting and teaching His apostles. He lost His personal feelings, His temptations to think only of the cross, by pouring His sacred final thoughts into His chosen ones. “He loved them to the end.” This is true humility. Humility does not minimize or demean the one who has it; it constrains its possessor to so invest himself into a higher calling that he no longer

thinks of himself. His mind is occupied with a greater work and does not have any place for solely selfish thoughts.

Christ glorifies humility so that now it is the highest, noblest, and truest expression of godly living. Augustine was once asked, "What is the first step in the search for truth?" He replied, "Humility." He was then asked, "What is the second step?" He said, "Humility." He was asked again, "What is the third step?" He answered, "Humility."<sup>1</sup>

"It has been quaintly said that when we attempt to wash the saints' feet, we must be particularly careful along three lines: (1) The water must not be too hot; (2) our own hands must be clean; (3) we must be willing for them to wash our feet."<sup>2</sup>

*Here is insight into genuine self-sacrifice.* Jesus knew that the Father had given to Him all things. John specified, "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself" (John 13:3, 4). Being fully conscious that He was the divine Christ—being vividly aware of what the Father had given Him, of what He was going to be doing, and of where He was going—Jesus put all these mind-bending truths aside and gave the apostles what they needed. Paul exhorted the Philippians, "Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4). Paul had learned, and the Philippians would learn, how to do this by looking at the example of Jesus. Self-sacrifice is not throwing away one's life; it is giving up one's life for the spiritual good of others. It is choosing to expend one's energies for the greater good of those who are within our reach.

*Here is a vivid picture of a faithful servant.* The apostles may have been arguing about who ought to wash the feet of those who were present. This "who-should-do-it" question may have been the application part of their larger, ongoing debate about who would be the great-

est in the kingdom. The air was filled with words, but there was no action. No one had risen to do what needed to be done. There was much supposition and plenty of theory, but the Twelve had left undone a menial task that the occasion required. No actual servant (who normally would do this deed) was present, which seems to imply that, by intention, none had been appointed for the task. One of the apostles was to do the foot-washing, to perform this common courtesy, but who? Who of their number should do it? Should Peter? No, he had been given the keys to the kingdom (Matthew 16:19). Should Judas? No, he held the money bag. Should John? No, he was the disciple whom Jesus loved. Should Andrew? No, he had been the first called. On and on the arguments could have gone. In the midst of this thick air of selfishness, with men holding on to pride and position and demanding first choice and service, Jesus got up and washed their feet. Who is a servant? Jesus told them. He said,

... the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant. For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves (Luke 22:26, 27).

If the apostles did not get the message from Jesus' declaration, they surely got it from Jesus' demonstration.

A towel was a simple piece of cloth that was seen daily. Every house had towels, and everyone used them. We might think that such an occurrence as the use of a towel would be listless and non-expressive, for it was commonplace. However, when Jesus took it and used it to wash the apostles' feet, He turned it into one of the world's greatest memories. It became a testimony that conveyed humility, self-sacrifice, and servanthood. He who forgets it forgets who Jesus was (and is)—and forgets the true calling of discipleship.

Eddie Cloer



<sup>1</sup>Adapted from Augustine *Letter 118* 3.22.

<sup>2</sup>W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Apostle John: Studies in His Life and Writings* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), 205.

*"Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as*

*more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obe-*

*dient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:3–11).*