Taking Up the Towel

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In a famous passage in John 13, Jesus took a towel and a basin and washed the feet of His disciples. He told them:

"If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet" (John 13:14).

Some devout Christians take this verse literally. They have made it their custom to have "foot washing" services. This is commendable — yet, if it remains only a ritual, the true meaning of foot washing has been lost.

After Jesus washed the disciples' feet, He put His garment back on, sat down and asked them, "Do you know what I've just done to you?" In other words: "Do you understand the spiritual significance of foot washing?"

I believe the Lord's question is for us today as well. Indeed, something very powerful and profound was taking place; Christ was teaching His church one of its most important lessons. Yet, do we understand the depths of what Jesus did in washing the disciples' feet?

Jesus was not instituting an ordinance to be carried on throughout the church ages, such as communion or water baptism. If that were so, He would have instituted it at the beginning of the disciples' training. And He would have submitted to a foot washing Himself, as He had done with water baptism.

I pored over my Bible commentaries to see what the church fathers have said about this scene. Almost without exception, they wrote that its significance is in Jesus' example of humility. He took the lowly place to show us how to be humble. Yet I believe this interpretation misses the meaning of the passage entirely. After all, Jesus had already set an example of humility by taking on human form — by laying aside His glory and coming to earth as a servant.

No — this passage says so much more than that! I believe Jesus was giving us an example of the kind of physical manifestation He desires most — that of "taking up the towel"!

Today, when we speak of manifestations, we think of people in church meetings falling to the ground. To many, that kind of manifestation seems strange. Yet, as you study the Word of God, you learn that Jesus talked a lot about unusual physical manifestations.

Jesus didn't talk about falling to the ground. But He did speak of falling into the ground and dying — to bear fruit! He spoke of the manifestation of taking up a cross — of cutting off an offending hand, plucking out an offensive eye, going an extra mile.

Yet one of the most unusual of all the manifestations Christ talked about is His call to take up the towel. Throughout my years in ministry, many people have asked, "Why don't we wash each other's feet in church, as Jesus told us to? He said, 'If I do it, you should do it, too.'"

I usually answered, "What Jesus is talking about is primarily a spiritual thing, and not just physical." Yet even as I said this, I had no concept of the spiritual meaning of foot washing.

We gloss over certain truths in the Bible because we don't understand their meaning - and for years we miss the power of these passages. For example, Scripture tells us:

"...by love serve one another" (Galatians 5:13).

And:

"(Submit) yourselves one to another in the fear of God" (Ephesians 5:21).
How many of us really know what it means to serve one another in love? And how are we supposed to submit to one another in the fear of God? It's easy enough to understand how a wife is to submit to the spiritual authority of a godly husband. And the same is true for children submitting to godly parents. But in what practical ways do we serve and submit to one another in the house of God?

I believe that if we understand what Jesus did in washing His disciples' feet, we will understand these concepts of service and submission. You see, serving one another in love and submitting to one another in godly fear mean much more than taking orders from or being accountable to a higher authority. Rather, these glorious truths are unlocked only in the context of "taking up the towel."

While I was in prayer recently, the Holy Spirit gave me three words to open my understanding about this matter of taking up the towel. The three words are dirt, comfort and unity. Hopefully, as we examine these words, the Holy Ghost will unlock to us His truth:

1. Let Us Begin With the Matter of Dirt Clinging to A Christian Brother or Sister!

The disciples were twelve men beloved of God - precious in His eyes, full of love for His Son, pure-hearted, in full communion with Jesus. Yet they had dirt on their feet!

Jesus, in essence, was saying to these men, "Your hearts and hands are clean, but your feet are not. They've gotten dirty in your daily walk with Me. You don't need your whole body to be washed — only your feet."

The dirt Jesus mentions here has nothing to do with natural dirt. It's all about sin — our faults and failures, our giving in to temptations. And no matter how dusty and dirty the roads were in ancient Jerusalem, no age was ever as filthy as ours!

I wonder how many people reading this message right now have some dirt clinging to them. Perhaps this past week you fell into a temptation or failed God in some way. It's not that you've turned your back on the Lord. On the contrary — you love the Savior more passionately than ever. But you fell, and now you're grieving — because your feet are dirty!

Scripture tells us:

"Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted" (Galatians 6:1).

The Greek word for fault here means "a fall, a sin, a transgression." We are to restore every Christian who falls into sin, if there is a repentant heart.

And foot washing, in its deepest spiritual meaning, has to do with our attitude about the dirt we see on our brother or sister. So, I ask you: What do you do about the dirt on your brother or sister has everything to do with the ministry Jesus describes as "taking up the towel." It has everything to do with how you serve others in love and submit to others in the fear of God.

Let me say very clearly: Christians can be very cruel! In fact, believers often are more vicious and destructive than the wicked in the streets. And Jesus knew that. He knew how we react to the sight of dirt on someone else — how we put on a holier-than-thou attitude, judging, gossiping and slandering. Indeed, carnal Christians delight in seeing dirt on others. But their spreading of the dirt is the dirtiest sin of all!

In recent weeks, I've been trying to encourage a young pastor who resigned from his church after confessing a moral transgression. This dear man loves the Lord. He has a heart for people and for God's Word. But his feet got dirty! Yet he is totally repentant.

As soon as I heard about his fall and resignation, the Holy Spirit instructed me to get in touch with him immediately. I knew this young pastor was still a good man. He hadn't suddenly become wicked. His heart wasn't hardened over
his sin.

Yet his best friends forsook him. Those who claimed to love him most now ignored him, as if he had an infectious disease. To top it off, his denominational leaders demanded he make a video of his confession — giving every vivid detail of his transgression.

I called this dear brother — and I took a towel with me. I left a message on his answering machine, saying: "Brother, I want you to know I love you. God isn't finished with you. If you have a repentant heart, the Lord will restore you. And I'm going to stand with you!"

Beloved, taking up a towel is an attitude, a commitment. It means doing all within our power to cleanse the dirt off our brother's feet. It says, "I'm committed to helping you clean off the dirt — to restore your reputation, your family — to do everything to keep you alive in Christ!"

A friend of this pastor later called me. He said, "David, you will never know what your phone call meant to my friend — how blessed, encouraged and comforted he was. No one else has reached out to him. Your words gave him new hope."

Scripture clearly states that whenever a brother or sister has been overtaken in a sin, we must restore that person — serving him in love, submitting to him in the fear of God. Yet, you may ask, how are we to do this?

We are to take up the towel of God's mercy and go to that hurting one. In the special love of Jesus, we are to submit all of our human inclinations to ignore him, judge him, expose him, lecture him and find fault with him — and, instead, we are to commit to being his friend. We are to help wash away his sins by sharing the correcting, healing, washing, comforting Word of God.

This is not overlooking or winking at sin. It is not calling evil good. We're talking about fallen saints who have repentant hearts yet are without hope. They know they have grieved the Lord — and they live with fear, guilt, rejection.

It's a different matter entirely with those who have been warned two or three times yet persist in their sin. The Bible says we are to sharply rebuke such believers in public so that others may fear God. Often they must be disfellowshiped for a season, until they demonstrate godly sorrow. But those who acknowledge their sin — who confess it and forsake it — are in need of someone to bring the towel of mercy, to bring them cleansing and healing.

A few years ago, an associate pastor of a very large church called me in tears. He told me, "Brother David, I can't keep my head up, I'm so broken." He described to me the pain he experienced when his teenage daughter became pregnant outside of marriage. The senior pastor of the church demanded that this associate go before the congregation and tell them what his daughter had done.

This dear man did just that — and it devastated his daughter. It broke the family's heart. But the congregation wallowed in all the details of the poor teenage girl's sin.

Then, a year later, the senior pastor's teenage daughter became pregnant. But this time, the senior pastor did everything in his power to cover it up.

God, have mercy on us — because we destroy people who get dirt on their feet! When will we ever learn to take up the towel of mercy — to commit ourselves to cleansing and restoring, rather than throwing dirt into the wind and destroying precious souls?

2. Those Who Take Up the Towel Are the True Comforters Whom the Holy Ghost Uses!

Do you know what it's like to be barefoot and have to walk through mud? The dirt that cakes on your feet can be truly miserable. You feel much better when your feet are washed and clean.

When Jesus washed the dirt from His disciples' feet, they were comforted. But, spiritually speaking, Jesus was teaching the comfort of transgressions removed!
In 1 Corinthians 5, we read of a man in the church who fell into the terrible sin of incest. Evidently the man was unrepentant, and Paul directed the church to turn him over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh (that is, to the saving of his spirit). Paul was not saying the man was lost and going to hell. No — he only wanted him isolated from fellowship and given over to Satan's devices, so he would come to his wits' end and be driven to repentance.

Later, in 2 Corinthians 2, Paul found out the same man had become repentant and that the church had forgiven him. Satan had brought him to despair, and the lust in his flesh had been destroyed. The man had come back repentant. And now Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

"...ye ought rather to forgive him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him" (2 Corinthians 2:7-8).

Paul knew this man was absolutely overwhelmed with grief and sorrow. Those in the church had seen his brokenness and humility, and they were overcome with a spirit of mercy. They encouraged him, were tenderhearted toward him and washed his feet. Now he was clean — and he was being restored to the body of Jesus Christ. What a wonderful picture!

There are many Christians today who are in the same condition as this man, after being overtaken by a sin. They say to themselves, "I have reproached my Savior. I've brought shame to His name!" Yet what they experience is nothing like what 2 Corinthians describes.

I want to show you a passage from a book I received not long ago. It was written by the daughter of a pastor who was overtaken by a sin several years ago. And for all those years the family has endured a nightmarish hell. She writes:

"...(The press) followed us to our homes. We got phone calls from famous gossip tabloids offering large sums of money for a story. We'd finally succeed in getting Dad out of the house and into a restaurant, only to find ourselves the subject of people's conversations. It was horrible.

"But Reverend ______ was never ashamed to identify with us. Dad would literally sit by the phone awaiting this man's call. He was overcome with guilt and shame.... Dad had sunken into deep depression.... People to whom he gave so much of himself were the ones who turned against him so harshly.

"New rumors were spread daily. Ministers wrote to one another, spreading those rumors.... Only a select few proved true by showing Christian love and restoration, by calling us and remembering us in their prayers."

I know the man this daughter is describing. He is a dedicated man of God, a good father and a caring pastor. His heart is still passionately in love with Jesus. In fact, he has been restored and is pastoring a growing church.

Yet, can you imagine how he has felt all these years? Everyone he'd ministered to for years turned against him - including those he'd won to Christ! He was devastated, overwhelmed with sorrow. At one point his daughter suggested to her husband that they take the gun out of the man's house, fearing that in his depression he might be overcome by thoughts of suicide.

This lonely, despairing man waited by the phone for a call from his faithful pastor friend. The loving, compassionate minister was the only one willing to bring a towel to his friend — a little comfort, a word of encouragement, a brief moment of laughter.

Can you blame the fallen, dejected pastor for wanting just a little relief from the long years of pain inflicted by God's people and other ministers?

The World Outside the Church Has Become Demonized With the Spirit Of Hate — Character Assassination, Slander, Destruction of Reputations And Families

No sooner does a politician announce he's running for office than the press turns into a pack of vultures, digging into his past life just to find some dirt. And when they find it, they plaster it across the headlines, for all of America to wallow in.
America has gone crazy with slander! TV is rife with talk shows featuring gossip, exposure, mockery. The wicked get their thrills from destroying people, families, good reputations. And the more lurid the dirt, the more the people love it.

But this kind of thing has no place in God's house. The church ought to be different. It ought to be a house of cleansing!

The Gentiles in Ephesus honored God's people by calling them "Christians," meaning, "kindhearted." They had seen how kindhearted these believers were toward others.

"And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:32).

If you want to be kindhearted - to take up the towel to restore a brother or sister — you don't need to know the details of how that person got dirty. Jesus did not ask His disciples, "How did you get such dirty feet?" He wanted only to accomplish their cleansings — to get the dirt off of them. His love for them was unconditional.

Likewise, those who walk in the fullness of Jesus Christ must also have this attitude of love toward those with dirty feet. We aren't to ask for details. Instead, we're to say, "Let's do something about the dirt!"

But too often, this isn't the case. Many Christians want to delve into all the gory details. They come to a believer who has dirty feet, saying, "I want to wash your feet. But, tell me — what happened? How'd you get so dirty?"

Then, at some point in the story of failure, the curious comforter realizes, "Oh, my — this is worse than I thought. I can't get involved in this. I can't handle it." And after two minutes of details, he comes to the end of his puny human mercy. He judges the person as too evil, beyond help — and chooses to ignore him. He drops his towel and goes his way.

Beloved, you can't wash feet in a judge's robes! You have to take off your self-righteous garments — your holier-than-thou attitude — before you can do any cleansing. Like Jesus, you must lay aside your outer garment and gird yourself with love. Off with all self-righteousness — all pride, all thoughts that you could never stoop so low! You must have an attitude that says, "I don't care what you did. If you're repentant and want to hear God's Word, I'll be kind and tenderhearted to you!"

Yet, you ask, what if the dirty person before you is a Judas — someone who has betrayed you? My answer to you is, Judas was in that room with the other disciples, and Jesus washed his feet too. Christ stooped to cleanse Judas' dirt, even though Satan had already put betrayal in his heart.

Indeed, modern-day Judases can be saved because of the Cross. Often we think of certain sinners, such as homosexuals or lesbians, as being hopelessly hooked. We think they can never be delivered. Yet Paul says of them:

"Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind [homosexuals], nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

"And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Such were some of us — but we had our feet washed by Jesus! I ask you — if Jesus is willing to justify all sinners, why aren't we willing to wash those sinners' feet? Paul says we are to be gentle and patient with all people:

"And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will" (2 Timothy 2:24-26).

Paul is saying, "You've got to be tenderhearted with everyone, to be willing to wash their feet. God may have mercy on them yet — and deliver them from their sin!"
Our church has spent almost thirty weeks now praying for revival in New York City. Yet, it doesn't matter how much a church prays; God will not plant new believers there if they're going to have to struggle amid a bunch of judging, self-centered Christians.

You see, every new believer is going to get his feet dirty before he becomes established in the faith. And he needs people who are willing to go to him quickly to wash his feet and restore him. True revival reflects this spirit of kindness — a spirit that's willing to take up the towel to cleanse and restore dirty believers!

3. Finally, We Come to the Word Unity!

I believe when Jesus washed the disciples’ feet, He was teaching a profound lesson on how to obtain unity of fellowship in the body of Christ.

As Jesus approached Peter to wash his feet, the disciple drew back.

"...Peter saith unto him, Lord, dost thou wash my feet?" (John 13:6).

Peter asked in astonishment, "Lord, You aren't going to wash my feet, are You? Never, never!"

Jesus answered,

"...If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me" (verse 8).

Jesus was saying, in essence, "Peter, if I wash your feet, we have precious grounds for fellowship, a basis for true unity." Likewise, no pastor can bring unity into a church simply by implementing programs or even by his fiery preaching. No — unity comes from taking up a towel!

After Jesus washed His disciples’ feet, He asked them, "Do you understand what I have done to you?" If they had understood the spiritual significance of what He had just done — taking away the stain and guilt of their sin — it would have produced in them gratitude.

I ask you: What did Jesus do to you when He cleansed you? He wiped away all your fault and guilt — He cleansed the last remnants of sin — and you were made clean, whole. He put gratitude, thankfulness, joy in your soul. He filled you with such love for Him that you would follow Him anywhere and do anything for Him. All you wanted was communion with Him, because of what He did for you.

Beloved, that is the secret of unity! When you take up the towel of mercy for a hurting, fallen brother, you encourage him by embracing him in his hurt — by submitting in godly fear, washing away his feelings of worthlessness, anguish and despair, and by loving and caring for him.

Yet, what have you done to that person by washing his feet? You have constructed a firm foundation for true unity and glorious fellowship. You are one by your common experience — that is, by being washed by the water of the Word!

Talk about gratitude — that Christian will be your friend for life! He will defend you, love you, do anything for you. He'll say to you, "You stood with me in my hard times. And now I'll never let anyone do anything to you!"

Can you imagine a church filled with such caring people — who refuse to hear a single word about another’s dirt; who hurt when another hurts; who rally around every despairing, fault-ridden brother or sister with a word of love and hope? That is why we moved our ministry to New York City — to raise up a holy, godly remnant who would make up a strong, unified base of comforters — people who carry a towel in their hands!

You may ask, "But how do I find people whose feet need washing?" My answer to you is, "The same way you found them when you gossiped about them!"

Now, whenever you hear anything negative about someone, merely ask, "Who are you talking about? Name only, please!" Then go to that hurting person quickly with your mercy towel — and start washing his feet!
one, "I care about you. And I want to pray for you — but I don't need to know any details. I just want you to know I still love you — and I'm going to stand with you!"

This message is for me as much as for anyone else. I have just recently come into this convicting knowledge of what foot washing is truly about. And, by God's grace, I'll take up the towel of mercy along with others and seek out those hurting ones whose feet need cleansing from dirt.

Jesus said,

"If I then, as your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet.... If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them" (John 13:14, 17).

Now that we "know these things," as Jesus said, we can do them. I ask you: Are you willing to do them? Are you ready to take up your towel in love?

Hallelujah!

Links