

Christ the Cleanser

by Horatius Bonar

The sermon teaches that our personal acceptance in Christ is not affected by our daily sins, and that we should constantly seek forgiveness for our sins through Christ.

Scripture: Psalm 51:7, John 13:10, John 15:3, Romans 8:1, Ephesians 4:32, Philippians 2:7, Hebrews 10:22, 1 John 1:9, 1 John 2:1-2, Revelation 1:5

Topics: "Servanthood", "Daily Forgiveness"

Description

Horatius Bonar emphasizes the profound significance of Christ's act of washing the disciples' feet, illustrating His role as a servant and the importance of humility and service in the Christian life. He explains the distinction between being 'bathed'--representing our initial cleansing through faith in Christ--and the ongoing need for 'washing'--the daily forgiveness of sins as we navigate life. Bonar encourages believers to maintain their assurance of acceptance in Christ while regularly seeking forgiveness for their daily transgressions. He highlights that this understanding of grace empowers us to resist sin and serve others with love and humility, reflecting Christ's character in our actions. Ultimately, Bonar calls for a life of service that mirrors Christ's love and compassion for others.

Transcript

"He that is washed needeth not, save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit."--John 13:10.

THIS washing of the disciples' feet was one of the last of our Lord's acts on earth, as the servant of his disciples, the servant of sinners. How fully did that towel, and that basin, shew that he had "taken upon him the form of a servant," (Phil. ii. 7), and that he had come "not to be ministered unto, but to minister!" This last act of lowly love, is the filling up of his matchless condescension; it is so simple, so kindly, so expressive; and all the more so, because not referring to positive want, such as hunger, or thirst, or pain, but merely to bodily comfort. Oh, if he is so interested in our commonest comforts, such as the washing of our feet, what must he be in our spiritual joys and blessings! How desirous that we should have peace of soul; and how willing to impart it!

This scene of condescending love is no mere show. It is a reality. And it is a reality for us to copy. Love to the saints; love shewing itself in simple acts of quiet, lowly service; service pertaining to common comforts; this is the lesson for us, which the divine example gives. If He did this, what should we do? "If I your Lord

and Master have washed your feet, ye also ought to wash one another's feet."

But, in the midst of this scene and its lesson, there suddenly rises up a spiritual truth, called forth by Peter's remonstrance. The whole transaction is transferred into a type, or symbol, by the Lord himself. The earthly all at once rises into the heavenly as he utters these words, "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part in me." It is as if he had lighted up a new star in the blue, or rather withdrawn the cloud that hid a star already kindled, but hindered, in its shining, by an earthly veil.

Accepting, then, this spiritual truth as a vital part of the transaction, let us study its full meaning, as thus unveiled to us. The words of this tenth verse might be thus translated, or at least paraphrased:-- "He that has bathed (or come out of the bath) needs only, after that, to wash his feet; the rest of his person is clean." Here, then, we have first the bathing; and, secondly, the washing.

I. The Bathing.--The reference here may be to "the fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness;" in which we are "washed from our sins in his own blood" by "Him who loved us" (Rev. i. 5). The bath is the blood, and the bathing is our believing. From the moment we bathe, that is, believe, we are personally and legally clean in God's sight; our "bodies are washed with pure water" (Heb. x. 20). We may accept the reference here, as being either to the temple, or to the bath. He who bathes, say in the morning, is clean for the whole day. Our believing is our taking our morning bath. That cleanses our persons; and during all the rest of our earthly day we walk about, as men forgiven and clean; who know that there is no condemnation for them, and that God has removed their sins from them, as far as east is from the west. Connecting the washing here referred to, with the temple service, the meaning would be this:--We go to the altar and get the blood, the symbol of death, sprinkled upon us, implying that we have died the death, and paid the penalty, in him who died for us. From the altar we go to the laver, and get the blood washed off from our persons, proclaiming that we are risen from the dead, and therefore in all respects most thoroughly clean,-- "clean every whit,"--all over clean in our persons before God.

This is the bathing; and thus it is that we are cleansed, realizing David's prayer, "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than the snow." When I believe in Christ as the fountain, as the altar and the laver, that is, when I receive God's testimony concerning his precious blood, I am washed. I become clean; as Christ said to his disciples, "Now are ye clean through the word that I have spoken unto you." When I believe in Christ as the righteousness, that is, when I receive God's testimony concerning his divine righteousness, I am straightway righteous. When I receive him as the life, I have life. When I receive him as Redeemer, I am redeemed. When I receive him as the sinner's surety, I am pardoned; there is no condemnation for me. When I receive him as the dead and risen Christ, I die and rise again.

Such are the results of this divine bathing. They are present and immediate results. They spring straight from that oneness with him in all things into which my believing brings me. As a believing man, I enter upon his fulness; I become partaker of his riches; and so identified with himself, that his cleanness is accounted my cleanness, his excellence my excellence, his perfection my perfection. As he was the Lamb without blemish, and without spot, so I am "clean every whit;" and to me, as part of the cleansed Bride, the Lamb's wife, it is said, "Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee."

II. The Washing.--This is something different from the bathing, and yet there is a likeness between the two things. Both refer to forgiveness; or rather, we should say, that the first refers to personal acceptance, the latter to the daily forgiveness of the accepted one. The washing is not that of the person, but of the

person's feet,--those parts which come constantly into contact with the soil and dust of the earth. Considered personally, and as a whole, he is far above the earth, and beyond its pollutions; for he is with Christ in heavenly places; but, considered in parts, his feet may be said to be still upon the earth. In one sense he is "clean every whit," seated with Christ in heaven; in another, he is still a sinner, walking the earth, and getting his feet constantly soiled with its dust, or "thick clay." Our Lord here speaks of the washing in reference to this latter condition; and contrasts the continual washing with the one bathing; the daily pardons, upon confession, with the one acceptance, in believing; an acceptance with which nothing can interfere. With the sense of acceptance, we may say that many things can and do interfere; but with the acceptance itself, nothing can, either within or without, either in heaven or on earth.

The person who is bathed, is exposed after coming from the bath to constant soiling of his feet; but that is all. His person remains clean. The priest who has washed at the laver, is constantly getting his feet soiled with the dust of the temple pavement, or with the clotted blood which adheres to it. But this does not affect his person. That remains clean. So is it with the believing man. Personally accepted, and delivered from condemnation, he is every moment contracting some new stain, some defilement which needs washing. But this defilement does not affect his personal forgiveness, and ought not to lead him into doubt as to his acceptance. He himself is clean, through his reception of the word spoken to him by his Lord and Master; and he goes about the removal of his ever-recurring sins, as one who knows this. He betakes himself to Christ for the hourly removal of his sins, as one who has tasted that the Lord is gracious; he comes for the washing of his feet to him who has already bathed his person.

It is this distinction between the "bathing" and the "washing" that meets the difficulty felt by some, as to a believer constantly seeking pardon. He that has bathed needeth not save to wash his feet; but still he does need to have these washed. He that has been accepted in the beloved, has not daily to go and plead for acceptance, nor to do or say anything which implies that the condemnation, from which he has been delivered, has returned; but he has to mourn over, to confess, to seek forgiveness for daily sins. The two states are quite distinct, yet quite consistent with each other. The complete acceptance of the believing man does not prevent his sinning, nor do away with the constant need of new pardons for his sins; and the recurrence of sin does not cancel his acceptance, nor is the obtaining of new pardons at variance with his standing as a forgiven man.

It is this distinction which answers a question often raised, "Are all our sins, future as well as past, forgiven the moment we believe?" In one sense they are; for from the time of our believing, we are treated by God as forgiven men, and nothing can interfere with this. But in another they are not; for, strictly speaking, no sin can be actually forgiven till it exists, just as no one can be raised up till he actually fall, and as we cannot wash off the soil from our feet until it is on them. That God should treat his saints as forgiven ones, and yet that he should be constantly forgiving, are two things quite compatible,--and the "bathing and washing" of our text, furnish an excellent illustration of their consistency. All such questions have two sides, a divine and a human one. The mixing up of these two, or the ascribing to the one what belongs to the other, confuses and perplexes. The keeping of them separate makes all clear. With the divine side God has to do, with the human we have to do. Eternal forgiveness is God's purpose: daily forgiveness is our enjoyment and privilege.

We are apt to get into confusion here, and to feel as if our daily sins did interfere with our acceptance, and ought, for the time, to destroy our consciousness, or assurance of acceptance. Our Lord's words here clear up this difficulty, and rectify this mistake. "He that hath bathed needeth not, save to wash his feet." Our state of "no condemnation," is one which our daily sins cannot touch. These sins need constant

washing; but that does not affect the great truth of our personal cleanness in the sight of God, our having found grace in the eyes of the Lord. To suppose that it could do so, would be to misunderstand our Lord's distinction between the bathing and the washing.

Let us learn, then, how to deal with our daily sins, in consistency with this distinction. Suppose I sin,--suppose I get angry; shall I conclude that I have never been accepted, or that this sin has thrown me out of acceptance? No; but holding fast my acceptance, go and confess my anger to the Master. Suppose I allow the world to come in, and perhaps for days I become cold, and prayerless; shall I say, Ah, I have never been a forgiven man? or, This has broken up the reconciliation? No; but, undisturbed in my consciousness of pardon and reconciliation, I simply take my worldliness, my coldness, my prayerlessness to God; I go and wash my feet as often as they need it, and that is every moment; but, in doing so, I never lose sight of the blessed fact, that I have bathed, and that as nothing can alter this fact, so nothing can invalidate its effects. It abides unchanged. Once bathed, then bathed for ever!

Shall we sin, then, because grace abounds? Shall We soil our feet because our cleansing has been so perfect, and because the washing is so easy? No. How shall we who are dead to sin, live any longer therein? So far from being now in a more favourable position for committing sin, we are placed in one which, of all others, is the most effectual for delivering us from it. The conscious completeness of the pardon is God's preservative from sin; and it is the best, the most effectual. There is none like it. It is the source of our power against sin, and for holiness. Without this, progress in goodness, freedom in service, and success in labour are all impossible.

The bathing and the washing are, both of them, God's protests against sin; and, if understood aright, would be our most effectual safeguards. They come to us like Christ's words to the woman, "Neither do I condemn thee; GO AND SIN NO MORE." And what more likely to deepen our hatred of sin, than this necessary intercourse with our holy Master, in the reception of constant forgivenesses from his priestly hands. The more that we have to do with Him, the more are we sure to become like him; nor is anything more fitted to make us ashamed of our sins, than our being compelled to bring them constantly, and to bring them all, small and great, for pardon to HIMSELF.

It is thus that the Highest stoops to the lowest, and discharges toward them the offices of happy affection and considerate sympathy in the most menial things of life. Shall we not imitate his love, and by our daily acts of kindly service to our fellow-saints, knit together the members of the blessed household? However great in rank, or riches, or learning, shall we not stoop? "High in high places, gentle in our own." Shall we not thus win love? Not so much to ourselves, as to the beloved One; shewing his meekness in ours, his gentleness in ours, his lowliness in ours, his patience in ours; thus melting hearts that would not otherwise be melted, and winning affections that would not otherwise be won. "For as He is, so are we in this world."

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