

# Washing the Disciple's Feet

by John Nelson Darby

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*John Nelson Darby's sermon emphasizes the significance of Jesus washing the disciples' feet as a demonstration of His love, humility, and ongoing service to His followers.*

**Scripture:** John 13:1

**Topics:** "Servanthood", "Christ's Love"

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## Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes the profound love of Christ as He washes the disciples' feet, demonstrating humility and servitude just before His departure to the Father. He explains that Jesus' actions were motivated by His love for His disciples and His knowledge of His divine authority, signifying that He would continue to serve them even in glory. Darby highlights that this act symbolizes the ongoing cleansing believers need from the defilements of the world, and encourages Christians to emulate Christ's humility by serving one another. He concludes by inviting those who have not yet experienced Christ's service to believe in Him for forgiveness and eternal fellowship.

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## Transcript

### WASHING THE DISCIPLES' FEET

JOHN 13 : 1-11

Two of these verses claim particular attention in commencing our subject. The first is, " 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 verse 3 : " Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God, and went to God " : for these reasons He arose from supper, and prepared to wash His disciples' feet. Observe, dear friends, His knowledge that the hour was come when He should depart out-of this world unto the Father, and loving His own which were in the world unto the end, was one reason why our Lord washed the feet of His disciples ; and knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He was come from God and went to God, was another reason why He washed their feet.

This demands our attentive consideration : why His leaving the world, and the love which He had to His own which were in the world, and His knowledge of the power over all things which was given Him by the Father, His coming from God and now going to Him, should be the reasons why our Lord (as related in this chapter) laid aside His garments, and took a towel, and girded Himself. He did this because His hour was

come that He should depart out of this world, and because He loved His disciples unto the end. The reason is explained by what passed between our Lord and Peter : " 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."

Here, dear friends, we see the reason why our Lord's leaving the world, loving His own which were in the world, and an apprehension of His future glory, led Him to wash His disciples' feet. All is explained by His saying, " If I wash thee not thou hast no part with me." What do we learn from this ? That all His people have a part with Him; they partake of all the benefits of His life and death ; they are loved of the Father as Christ Himself is loved by Him; they have a part with Him in His future glory ; they are heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ ; they shall reign for ever with Christ, sitting with Him on His throne. In all things they are one with Him, and hence they are assured, " All things are yours, and ye are Christ's, and Christ is God's." I say then, dear friends, it was because His own had a part with Him that He washed their feet, when He knew that His hour was come that He should depart out of this world unto the Father ; it was " because he loved them unto the end, and was come from God, and went to God." Before He left the world, He thus declared why He had come into the world, that His people should have a part with Him, as I have already noticed. By washing their feet, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, He declared that the love which He had for His disciples, while He was with them in the world, would continue after He had left them, and went to God and the glory that He had with Him before the world was. Washing their feet, with a perfect view of this glory, and a consciousness that He would soon enjoy it, also signified that when in this glory He would continue to wash their feet, according to what He said to Peter : " If I wash thee not, thou. hast no part with me and " He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet which we shall afterwards consider.

Dear friends, I now direct your attention to the love of Christ for all who have a part with Him. He shewed this love in coming into the world to save them. While in this world, how great was the love He manifested for His disciples! No afflictions, toils, or sufferings that He endured, ever prevented the exercise of this love ; neither did their errors, weaknesses, or defects. One denying, all forsaking Him, did not abate it; it overcame, it continued through all. His hour was now come that He should depart out of this world : death-that death which He had undertaken to endure, that they might live for ever with Him in glory-was before Him, and He viewed it with a full comprehension of its sufferings. Did this present any obstacle to the exercise of His love? No: His was a love stronger than death ; and therefore we read in Luke 9 : 51 : " And it came to pass, when the time was come that he should be received up [as we read in another place, 'knowing all things that should come upon him'], he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem. He knew that He had there to contend with the powers of darkness, followed by His sufferings, death, and the grave; yet, with a full prospect of all, He stedfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem. Why ? Love urged Him onwards-love for His disciples, for all who have a part with Him. It was His Father's appointment; and therefore He said, " The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it ? " It was His own free engagement, expressed in verse 6 of Psalm 40 : " Mine ears hast thou opened " : better translated, and as you read it in the margin of some Bibles, " Thou hast digged ears for me." God the Father digged ears for Christ. What does this signify ? That the Father appointed and prepared Christ to hear and obey His will in saving His people in the type of His service for ever.

There is a shade of difference in the case of a Hebrew who preferred serving his master to his liberty, as we read in Exodus 21 : a Hebrew servant who had served his master for seven years was then entitled to liberty. The terms of servitude and its termination are there related : if he came in by himself, without wife or children, he should go out by himself; if he was married, then his wife should go out with him; if his master gave him a wife, and she had borne him sons or daughters, the wife and her children should be his master's ; but if the servant, who may have his liberty and go out by himself, should plainly say, " I love my master, I love my wife and my children, I will not go out free," then his master should bore his ear to the door-post, to signify that he was to serve him for ever.

Here, dear friends, is an exact representation of Christ's love for the church. He might have been for ever free from servitude and go out by Himself; He was not bound (I now speak of Him as God) to suffer and die for sinners ; but His Father had given Him a wife and children. You know, that in Scripture the church is described as the wife of Christ ' and its members as the children. In Ephesians 5, speaking of marriage, the apostle declares, " This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church " ; and in Hebrews 2, Christ is represented as saying, " Behold, I and the children which God hath given me." And, as in the case of the Hebrew servant, who so loved his master and his wife and children that he preferred serving his master to his liberty, from love to his master, to his wife, and children; so did Christ plainly declare to His Father, I will not go out free ; I love my Father, I love the church, I love the children ; mine ear shall be bored ~\* I will bind myself to that the Father has given me to do and to suffer for their salvation, having taken upon me the form of a servant, assumed their nature, descended into their world, and endured all that is needful to raise them to fellowship with the Father and myself in heavenly glory. This, dear brethren, was the reason that death, and a full apprehension of its sufferings, could not prevent the exercise of Christ's love for His people. I say, He stedfastly beheld it, yet never turned aside from it: floods of anguish overwhelmed Him; they compelled Him to cry out, as we read in Psalm 49: " Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul. I sink in the deep mire, where there is no standing : I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me. I am weary of my crying." Did this abate the love which was needed to endure it ? Did it here fail ? Did He turn aside from the bitter cup ? No : these many waters could not drown His love; He drank up the dreadful flood, that His people might be delivered from it: He took their place in suffering, that they might take His place in glory! I say, dear friends, it was in the exercise of this love, and in the prospect of the continuance after He had entered into His glory, that our Head when He knew that He should depart out of this world, girded Himself, and washed His disciples' feet; and this brings us to a particular consideration of what is signified. As I have already said, It was because they had a part with Him that He washed their feet.

He certainly intended it as a proof and example of humility and condescension. But observe, while He washed their feet, He said unto Peter, " What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know he after." This proves that by it our Lord signified another washing, also evident from Peter's saying unto Him, " Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head." This washing is not the cleansing of their persons, or the pardon of all their sins ; as declared by our Lord saying to Peter, " He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit." Here the entire cleansing of His people is described; they are compared to him who has just left the bath, and is perfectly clean; but we know that his feet might become that moment defiled ; and this, dear friends, is precisely our case. I now speak of believers ; Christ appears in the presence of God for us. This proves that He has for ever removed all our sins ; for this He came into our world and lay in the grave. His resurrec- i tion, and now appearing in the presence of God is, I say, a sufficient proof that He has for ever removed from God's sight all our sins ; His blood is in their place ; they are washed, born of water and of the Spirit, through which they are clean

every whit : but, dear friends, our feet are continually defiled ; we live in a defiling world, our earthly nature continues, Satan and the world act on it : what is the consequence ? Our mind and conscience are perpetually defiled ; not that the guilt of our sins ever returns to the view of God. This cannot be ; Christ is ever before Him for us, and His blood is now in the place where our sins were seen. But I say our sin and its guilt defile our mind and conscience ; it troubles us, it obscures the glory to which we are called, it interrupts our communion with God and the blessedness of fellowship with Christ and the Father.

Here is the defilement of our feet, from which we need continual washing; but because we have a part with Christ, though now in His glory, He never ceases to wash our feet. How does He wash them? By removing from our mind and conscience everything that interrupts our communion with God, and its glory and blessedness. We believe that we are admitted to this ; but, through the influence of nature and a defiling world, we cannot always enjoy it: everything in our nature, everything in the world, interrupts our fellowship with Christ and the Father, and mars our enjoyment of it. We still believe, we look up, but if the least guilt remains on the conscience we are dazzled, and perplexed ; the glory appears too high for us to reach or enjoy. Then how does Christ wash our feet ? I say, by delivering us from the consciousness of guilt and its influence : He restores to us a sense of complete pardon; He delivers us from the power of nature and the world ; He brings us into unhindered communion with Himself and the Father, and the enjoyment of its glory and blessedness. He again brings down to our apprehension what we are as seen in Him, and enables us to rejoice in it; and thus does He ever continue to wash our feet.

Dear friends, you now see the reason why Christ acted as a servant to His disciples when He was departing out of this world: "He loved them unto the end"; the end, not only of His life on earth, but during His eternal reign in glory. To them, to all who have a part with Him, He is a servant still ; He washes their feet, as I have noticed, and in all His feelings towards them is precisely the same as He was when on earth ; no change, no alteration whatever. Did His love for His disciples triumph over every obstacle to its exercise, over all their errors and defects, their defect in attachment to Himself? Such is His present love for all who have a part with Him. Did He bear with all the ignorance, errors, and weaknesses of His disciples, and only notice them to pardon and restore? Thus does He bear with His people now, equally compassionate and ready to supply all their wants. Did He say, " I am among you as he that serveth "? did He actually serve them, pouring water into a basin, and washing their feet, and wiping them with the towel wherewith He was girded ? He is the servant of His people still : He washes their feet with the same condescension and love that He felt for His disciples when He was leaving them to depart out of this world. Dear friends, let us ever remember that Christ, though now in His glory, is in all things precisely the same as He was when on earth; present with us at all times to render us the same services. We are one with Him, and He with us ; no distinction, no separation, as it respects His sympathy in all that concerns us : " In all their affliction he was afflicted " ; "we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones." Hence, after He had ascended and entered into His glory, when Paul persecuted His people, He said unto him, " Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? " He will say, " Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." In serving His people He considers nothing that affects them unworthy of His notice. He said unto Ananias, " Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus " : He knows the street and house where His people dwell, that He might there render them all needful services; for this He numbers the hairs of their heads.

Knowing that His hour was come that He should depart out of this world unto the Father, and that He would continue to love and serve His people, it was for this reason Jesus washed His disciples' feet. But

why is it said, that when Jesus knew that He should depart out of this world unto the Father, and that the Father had given all things into His hands, He arose from supper and washed the disciples' feet? I say., why did He do this at the prospect of His eternal fellowship with the Father, and His dominion over all things that the Father had given into His hands ? Because He knew that in that glory, and possessing power over all things, He would be the servant of His people for ever. How is He to serve them when they are with Him in His heavenly kingdom? By ministering to their happiness and enjoyment. This He Himself declares, as we read in Luke 12 . After exhorting His disciples to watch for His coming, He said, " Blessed are those servants whom the Lord when he cometh shall find watching: verily, I say unto you, that he shall gird himself, and make them sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them."

Dear friends, here we perceive that Christ will ever be the servant of His people; when they are with Him in His glory He will be unto them all that He was when on earth, so far as they need His services : they will need them only for their enjoyment; and for this, I say, He will always serve His people with the same love and compassion that He felt for His disciples when He washed their feet. His fellowship with the Father, His power over all things that the Father has put into His hands, He will ever use for making His people perfectly happy. Now He washes their feet: by removing from them everything that hinders their enjoyment of fellowship with Himself and the Father; because our earthly nature and all contact with a defiling world continually interrupt this enjoyment. But when we are with Him in His heavenly glory, we shall enjoy unhindered communion with God, and its full and perfect blessedness : to secure it Christ will still serve us. Is it not said, " He shall gird himself and make them sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them " ? Yes, He will do this by revealing and imparting unto them all that is needful for their perfect happiness. They shall feast with Him ; and in this feast He will serve them, they the guests, and He ministering to their enjoyment. And what a feast will that be! how great the delight which it will afford, when He who is Lord of all supplies, serves, and entertains every one who is admitted into it!

Now, dear friends, you see the reason why Jesus washed His disciples' feet, when He knew that His hour was come

that He should depart out of this world unto the Father, and that the Father had given all things into His hands. He then service which, in another manner, He will fulfil for ever. Now, I say, He washes our feet by removing from us all that defiles our mind and conscience, and hinders our enjoyment of the glory to which He has raised us. Yes ; we have fellowship with Him in His present glory, but a defiled mind and conscience interrupt its comfort and blessedness. " God," says the apostle in Ephesians 2, " hath quickened us together with Christ, and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus." I say we now live with Christ in His glory; but our earthly nature is still in a defiling world. We resemble the priests who served in the court of the temple, and had free admittance to the holy place. They were never removed from their service-why ? Because their persons had been washed and arrayed to prepare them for it. No need to repeat this, no renewal of their title to their sacred office. But their hands and feet were continually defiled by the blood of the sacrifices.

Then what must they do? Not depart from their place and office ; provision was made for cleansing them. The laver was placed between the brazen altar and the holy place, in which they washed their hands and feet, and then they served in the tabernacle. This, dear brethren, is precisely our case. We are priests, and now dwell with Christ in spirit; for God has raised us together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus, and He has made us kings and priests unto God and His Father. No alteration in our place and title, no removal from it. Christ has washed us, and we are clean every whit, and therefore we dwell with Him in heaven itself ; we -are admitted to unhindered communion with Him who is our- sacrifice, our

altar of incense, our table of shew-bread, our ark of the covenant-all that was in the temple - our hands and feet are continually defiled. What must we do? Precisely what they did-feel that our place with Christ and our title as priests are never altered ; for these we have been cleansed and arrayed, and, like the priests in the temple, we have only to wash our feet meanwhile. Christ, I say, dear friends, continues to render us this service.. The world and Satan act on our earthly nature. We cannot in any degree come in contact with the world without defilement ; for who can touch pitch and not be defiled ? But these never move us from our heavenly place in Christ, nor alter our title as priests unto God and His Father. Christ washes our feet, removes defilement from our minds and conscience, delivers us from the power of these things which cause its defilement ; and again we enjoy full fellowship with Him in the holy place into which God has raised us and made us to sit together in Christ Jesus.

Thus, dear friends, have I endeavoured to shew you why our Lord washed the feet of His disciples, knowing that the Father had given all things in His hands. Let us consider the obligation which this presents to His people, according to what we read in the chapter before us. " 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." How are we to fulfil this ? As Christ does in His heavenly glory. I noticed the way in which Christ washed His disciples' feet, when He was with them in the world. He patiently endured all their infirmities, errors, and defects, that He might intercede for them, and remove from their hearts and minds everything that defiled them. And so in His glory Christ is ever engaged in thus serving His people. And He truly declared, " Ye also ought to wash one another's feet " ; as I said, in the same manner, patiently enduring their ignorance, errors, weaknesses, defects, any defilement that cleaves to them-patiently enduring it, I say, that we might be the means of removing it. The servant is not greater than his Lord. If Christ, now in His glory, is thus engaged, we should think it an honour to resemble Him. How are we to resemble Christ in washing one another's feet ? By endeavouring to remove from our Christian brethren everything that defiles their mind and consciences, and hinders the blessedness of their fellowship with Christ and the Father ; bearing their burdens, comforting them in their afflictions, and restoring them to a right mind by affectionate reproof; also, by praying for them. Yes, we should resemble Christ, who is their High Priest, ever restoring, ever interceding for them ; by endeavouring, I say, to deliver them from their defilement, to remove their sorrows, and to disengage them from nature and the world by a faithful testimony of their error. We should also pray for them, pray for their deliverance from everything that defiles and troubles them ; like our Lord and Master, ever meek, patient, compassionate, and tender in our conduct towards them. This is recommended in Philippians 2: " Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others." The example of Christ is there proposed to us " Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant . . . and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."

Dear friends, when we consider how little we resemble Christ in His humility, and in all that He did and is now doing as the servant of His people' we cannot wonder that the apostle said, " I have no man like-minded, who will naturally care for your state ; for all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's." Why are we disinclined to resemble Christ in His services to His disciples ? Because we so faintly apprehend the glory in which He now reigns. Observe, dear friends, the prospect of His soon enjoying this glory is said to be the reason that Christ girded Himself and washed His disciples' feet ; He knew that when in this glory He would continue what He meant by the service. He rejoiced at it ; it was part

of the joy set before Him ; and therefore, I say, He washed the disciples' feet. We see but little of the glory of Christ, and of our glory in having a part with Him ; and for this reason we are not inclined to imitate and obey our Lord and Master in washing one another's feet. As we behold this glory, and enjoy it, so will be our inclination and pleasure to fulfil the lowest service for His disciples. For in truth, the services that I mean are the highest ; because they make us like Him who washed His disciples' feet, who now serves them in all which it signified, and will be their servant for ever. Observe, then, dear friends, our Lord's declaration : " If I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, ye also ought to wash one another's feet." The Lord bless His word, and enable us all to obey Him.

Before I conclude, let me say a word to those who may not yet have experienced any of the services of Christ. To you, dear friends, I present Him as a Saviour ; if you see and feel your separation from God, because your sins interpose between you and Him, believe in Christ, and your sins will be removed from the sight of God, and then you will enjoy all the present and future glory and blessedness of those who have a part with Christ. Your sins, whatever they may be, are no obstacle to your enjoyment of this glory. If all the sins that ever were committed in the world were congregated in your persons and were your own act, this need not prevent your believing in Christ, and coming unto God through Him. Christ bore in His own body on the tree the sins of all who believe in Him; and now lives in the presence of God for them. I say, whatever be their sins, though great as the sin of His murderers, for even these He pardoned. Believe in Him, dear friends, and you will enjoy all His services, and reign with Him in His glory. The Lord bless what has been said to all who hear me, and to Him be all praise Amen.

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