

The Doctrine of Footwashing

Passages: Jn 13:1–17

Memory Verse

“If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.”
(John 13:14)

| Knowledge of God’s Will [God’s Word] | Knowledge of God [God’s Divine Nature] | Good Work [Behavior] |
|---|--|--|
| 1. Footwashing is an important sacrament performed in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 2. We must receive footwashing to have a part in Jesus. | This sacrament reminds us of God’s unfailing love. | 1. Keep our feet clean through sanctification in the Spirit and the truth. 2. Guide our footsteps on the path of God’s word by standing within His house and loving our brethren. |

Overview

Events and Spiritual Teachings

- A. Footwashing and Its Establishment
- B. The Spiritual Significance of Footwashing
- C. The Teachings Behind Footwashing
- D. Criteria for Footwashing

Life Application

Living in Holiness

Memory Verse

Conclusion: Though we may receive the sacrament of footwashing only once in our lives, our feet need to continue following in the footsteps of love, forgiveness, humility, and servitude that have been left behind by Jesus Christ.

Spiritual Teachings

A. Footwashing and Its Establishment

You've probably seen footwashing performed after each water baptism in church, but do you remember when it was first performed and established? Just before Jesus Christ was betrayed by Judas and sentenced to death before the Jewish council, He shared an evening meal with all of His disciples. The Gospel of John records this beautiful act of the Lord Jesus Christ in chapter 13. The Lord "rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded" (Jn 13:4–5).

Can you imagine our Lord Jesus Christ, the highest of all Kings, Lord and Creator of all, setting aside His robe and humbly washing each of the disciples' feet? He even washed the feet of Judas, who would soon betray Him. Jesus then taught His disciples that he "who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean" (Jn 13:10).

Jesus gave us an important instruction: after we have been baptized, we must accept footwashing and understand its spiritual effect when it is performed. Then, we will be completely clean. Footwashing is not simply a symbolic action. It is a sacrament, meaning:

- Jesus Christ Himself set the example;
- Jesus Christ commanded His disciples to do likewise; and
- It carries the spiritual effect of salvation.

Therefore, to have a part with Jesus and His salvation, we need to accept footwashing after baptism. But what does Jesus Christ mean by "completely clean" in John 13:10? And what are the spiritual effects of footwashing? First, let's examine the spiritual significance behind footwashing.

B. The Spiritual Significance of Footwashing

Footwashing is, physically, a simple act. However, there is a much deeper meaning behind this sacrament. In the same way that Holy Communion is so much more than simply eating and drinking, footwashing has greater spiritual significance and intent behind the action of washing one's feet.

1. Jesus Christ set the example for us

Washing one's feet for comfort or hygiene was quite common. Either water was offered to the guest, or the slave of the host washed the guest's feet (Gen 18:3–5).¹ However, despite being both Teacher and host, Jesus Christ "rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded" (Jn 13:4–5). By washing His students' feet with His own two hands, Jesus Christ broke tradition and set a new example for us to follow.

2. It was commanded by Jesus Christ

After Jesus Christ washed His disciples' feet, He commanded them, "For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you," and, "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them" (Jn 13:15, 17). The fact that this command came with a blessing shows how

¹ TJC Department of Literary Ministry, *Bible Study Guide: John*, (Malaysia: True Jesus Church, 2012), https://bsg.tjc.org/tjc_bsg_lesson/john-23/?guide_id=49, "Did You Know...?".

important it is. Just as our Master washed the feet of sinners, we who follow Him are called to do likewise.

3. It is required for salvation

Peter at first refused to permit Jesus to wash his feet, to which the Lord Jesus replied, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me” (Jn 13:8). Hearing this, Peter immediately turned right around and asked Jesus to also wash his head and hands. From Peter’s reaction, we can see how important it is to have a part with Christ. But what does it mean to “have a part with Christ”? The original Greek word for “part,” *méros*, means a share or division in something. God is offering us a portion of His grace, promises, salvation, and heavenly inheritance.

C. The Teachings Behind Footwashing

Aside from its spiritual effects, footwashing also offers us teachings that we can and ought to apply to our daily lives. We may only require footwashing once after our baptism, but the intention behind the act should stay with us for the rest of our lives as God’s chosen.

1. Love and forgiveness

By personally washing the feet of His students, Jesus Christ demonstrated how much He “loved His own who were in the world.” He truly “loved them to the end” (Jn 13:1). Today, we are also loved as disciples of Christ. Therefore, as recipients of God’s love, we should serve and love one another (Jn 13:34). Jesus Christ tells us, “This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12).

It is significant to us that the Lord also washed the feet of Judas Iscariot. Jesus Christ already knew that Judas was the one who would soon betray Him (Jn 13:2). He also knew that this betrayal would lead Him to a painful death on the cross—an outcome even Judas himself was likely unaware of. Yet Jesus still washed Judas’ feet, showing both to him and to us the depth of His love and forgiveness.

2. Humility and servitude

Jesus Christ had a clear sense of purpose when He came to earth. He knew that “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). He did not appear as a man to be glorified or exalted in this world, but “made Himself of no reputation,” and instead “humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Phil 2:6–8). His very birth as a human in this world was an act of humility and service for mankind.

By washing their feet, Jesus Christ not only reminded the disciples of His mission, but also taught them to follow His example of servitude and humility. He said, “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet” (Jn 13:14). In the same way, we should follow Jesus Christ’s example and serve those around us with love and humility.

D. Criteria for Footwashing

1. Recipients of footwashing:

- a. Must be properly baptized according to the Bible.
- b. May receive the sacrament of footwashing only once.
- c. Must be determined to follow the teachings related to footwashing. For example, the person must be resolute in maintaining holiness and living a life of humility.

2. Those who wash the feet of others:

- a. Must perform the footwashing in the name of Jesus Christ.
- b. Represent the Lord Jesus Christ during the footwashing. Therefore, the one performing the washing must have a sense of humility as he pours water into a basin, washes the believers' feet, and wipes their feet with a towel.
- c. Should only try to wash the feet of those who are of the same gender, out of holiness.

When someone receives the sacrament, a brother- or sister-in-Christ performs the footwashing, but in spirit, it is our Lord who washes our feet.

Check for Understanding

1. **Where is footwashing recorded in the Bible?** The Gospel of John, chapter 13.
2. **What is the spiritual significance of footwashing?** Jesus Christ set the example for us; it was commanded by Jesus Christ; and it is required for salvation.
3. **What are the teachings behind footwashing?** Love and forgiveness; humility and servitude.
4. **Why should footwashing be seen as an important doctrine, even though it is only recorded in one gospel?** Footwashing is important, as it pertains to our salvation. Even though it is only recorded in one gospel, we need to partake in this sacrament because Jesus said, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me" (Jn 13:8).
5. **What are the criteria for those who perform and receive footwashing?** (See *Section D.*)

Life Application

Living in Holiness

Our feet reflect our lifestyle and our faith because the path which we direct them to go greatly affects our spiritual lives. Do your feet carry you to church each week? Or do they carry you elsewhere on Sabbath day? Do they carry you towards an act of service for the Lord, or do they carry you towards temptation? We may receive footwashing only once in our lives, but our feet need to continue following in the footsteps left behind by Jesus Christ.

1. Are Your Feet Clean?

We learned that to "have a part" with Jesus Christ (Jn 13:8) means to receive a portion of His glory and His heavenly inheritance. But the Bible also says, "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?" (1 Cor 6:9). To have a part of our inheritance with Jesus, we must also have a part in His lifestyle. This means following in His footsteps by imitating Him and striving to be clean and holy.

When we are baptized and undergo footwashing, we are being cleansed of our sins by "the washing of water by the word" (Eph 5:26). Knowing this, we must now walk appropriately, so that we can present ourselves before God as "holy and without blemish" (Eph 5:27).

a. Sanctified by the Spirit

Sin is a serious matter to God that brings shame to our Lord Jesus. He loves us so much that He was willing to give Himself up (Rom 8:32) and pay a great price to save us from sin. Imagine His sadness when we walk right back towards what He died to save us from! But how do we remain holy when we live in a society filled with temptations, immorality, and godless values?

Once our feet have been washed, we need to make a conscious effort to separate ourselves

from our old ways and make the determination to keep our feet as clean as possible. To act out this determination, we need the help of the Spirit. Peter wrote that it is the Spirit that sanctifies us (1 Pet 1:2). When we determine to ask God through the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome sin, He will give us the strength to live in holiness, to abstain from living in an immoral world, and to walk as a separate people.

b. Sanctified by the Truth

Striving to become clean and holy requires more than our determination. Due to our sinful natures, we need God's help. In His prayer for His disciples, Jesus Christ asked God to "sanctify them by Your truth" (Jn 17:17). Likewise, when we obey the truth through the Spirit, we purify our souls (1 Pet 1:22). The Bible is so much more than words on a page. It reflects our sins so that we can correct our errors and learn to walk in holiness. Therefore, to keep our feet clean, we must root ourselves firmly in the word of God, so that we are continually sanctified by the truth.

2. Where Are Your Feet Taking You?

To continue following in Jesus' footsteps, we must learn to choose the correct path. But since the road of life is often foggy and unclear, we need a proper light to help us find the correct way. The Bible tells us that God's word is "a lamp to [our] feet and a light to [our] path" (Ps 119:105). If we follow God's word and choose our path according to it, we'll be able to avoid the wide, dusty roads and stick to the narrow path to heaven.

a. Stand Within the House of the Lord

To have a part with Jesus Christ means to be a part of His body, which is the church. One psalmist wrote, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go into the house of the LORD.' Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!" (Ps 122:1-2). It is important that our feet are standing within Jerusalem, which is our church today. When we worship in Jesus' name as one body, God dwells among us.

Let's read Hebrews 10:24-25: "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching." When we stand within the house of the Lord with our brethren, we lift each other up, and "stir up love and good works" in each other. By surrounding ourselves with our brethren in Christ, we encourage both ourselves and each other to strive for the Lord and to grow in faith together.

b. Love Our Brethren

The footsteps that Jesus left for us to follow are immersed in the greatness of God's love. Jesus exemplified the love of God right up to His death and beyond. John 13:1 says, "Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end." This is the full extent of the Lord's unfailing love: He loved them to the end. After we receive footwashing, we need to love others with the same love. We need to walk in Christ's love.

Walking in Christ's love is like walking in a pair of sensible shoes. Just as good shoes shield our feet from dirt and pebbles, Christ's love keeps our spiritual feet from sin and danger. Love is the mark of a Christian. However, if we say we love God but don't love our church members, the love of God is not in us (1 Jn 4:20). "Love and good works" (Heb 10:24) do not just occur on their

own or in our words alone. We must actively guide our feet towards loving our brethren.

So, how do we love our brethren? At times, other members may become tired or unsteady on their feet, making it easy for them to lose focus and wander off to dangerous or unnecessary detours. When this happens, we who are stronger in Christ are there to get them back on track. It is a degree of the highest love when we show our brethren patience and gentleness, regardless of their personality or character. When we do so, we are walking in Christ's love.

c. Share the Gospel

Paul wrote that "all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal 5:14). The greatest act of love that we can show is bringing the gospel to others. By sharing the gospel with unbelievers, we can leave imprints that clearly show the glorious love of our Creator! "And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!'" (Rom 10:15).

Memory Verse

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

Meaning

This is our Lord's command to us. Since He has set the example by washing His disciples' feet, we need to do likewise to one another. In doing so, we exhibit the love and humility of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, only by doing so will we have a part with Him in eternity.

Conclusion

We may receive the sacrament of footwashing only once in our lives, but our feet need to continue following in the footsteps left behind by Jesus Christ. We need to learn to live out the love and forgiveness that Jesus Christ exemplified during His lifetime and adopt a Christ-like attitude of humility and servitude. When we think of how Jesus humbly served throughout His lifetime, remember that He commanded us to do likewise and that we are blessed if we follow in His example.

Lesson 9 Homework Assignment Answer Key

1. What characteristics does Jesus want us to follow with the act of footwashing?
He wants us to exhibit the same love and humility that He demonstrated with footwashing.
2. "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go into the _____ of the LORD!' Our _____ have been _____ within your _____, O Jerusalem!" (Psalm 122:1–2)
house; feet; standing; gates
3. What is a sacrament?
A sacrament is an example set by Jesus Christ and something that we must do in order to carry the spiritual effect of salvation.
4. Name at least three important life applications that we should follow after we receive footwashing. Explain each in detail.
*Be sanctified by the Spirit; be sanctified by the truth; stand within the house of the Lord; love our brethren; and share the gospel.
See Life Application section for details.*