

Questions
GOD ASKS US



Do You Understand What I Have Done for You?

“Do you understand what I have done for you?” This question faces all those who want to walk the Jesus way. Even though Jesus answered the question to some extent, we do not seem to have grasped its revolutionary significance. Jesus’ foot-washing action sharply contradicts the dominant way our society is organized, so we tend to shy away from the question’s tough challenge. Foot-washing seems too inconsistent with our culture, too challenging, too radical for ordinary people like you and me. Let us, however, put aside our concerns for the moment and allow Jesus’ question to engage us.

Excerpt from *Questions God Asks Us*, pg. 123

The Journey Downward¹

Read John 13:1-17. *“It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” (13:1).*

The public teaching of Jesus has been completed, and now for several chapters Jesus focuses exclusively on teaching “his own” — his disciples — and trying to prepare them for what is to come. The statement that “he loved them to the end” is striking. The end (*telos* in Greek) could mean “end” in the sense of conclusion or termination, or “end” in the sense of goal, aim, or fulfillment. Perhaps both meanings are intended. Jesus loved his disciples to the very end of his earthly life and ministry, and he loved them fully and completely, without condition or reservation, for this was the fulfillment of his mission.

Jesus knows that his “hour” has come to depart from this world and return to the Father (13:1). He knows that the Father has given all things into his hands, and that he has come from God and is going to God (13:3). Knowing all this, Jesus chooses to demonstrate his love for his disciples in a dramatic way by taking the role of a servant and washing their feet.

¹ The content of this section is adapted from E. Johnson’s article “Footwashing: John 13:1-17”

In washing his disciples' feet, Jesus simply uses water and a towel, yet the extravagance is no less. Indeed, it is nothing short of shocking that the one who comes from God and is going to God should take on the menial task of a slave. This act points to the even greater shock to come in the dark hours ahead, when Jesus will lay down his life, crucified on a Roman cross — the form of execution reserved for rebels and slaves.

Peter gives voice to the shock of Jesus' actions. "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" When Jesus says that Peter will understand later what he is doing, Peter objects even more strongly: "You will never wash my feet." We are reminded of Peter's objections in Mark's Gospel when Jesus speaks of his impending suffering and death (Mark 8:32). Here, as in Mark, Jesus corrects Peter: "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."

Jesus' society was arranged like a pyramid. At the top were the powerful—the well-off, the well-educated, the well-connected. At the bottom were the powerless—the slaves, the uneducated, and the alienated. Their job was to serve those at the top. One of the ways in which those at the bottom served those above was to wash their feet after a journey or when they came to your home. This menial job was reserved for the lowest of servants. Now you can imagine what must have been going through the minds of the disciples. Who was going to do this job? Certainly none of them was prepared to!

When Jesus got up, put the towel around his waist, and began washing their feet, he was identifying with those at the bottom of the pyramid. Quite literally he had gone on a journey downward, acting as a servant. Not surprisingly, Peter reacted strongly.... Perhaps like Peter you also resist the idea of a downward journey. Yet God continues to call us on this journey downward. Each of us needs to work out what this may mean in our particular situation. At the very least, it implies our involvement with people at the bottom of the pyramid.

Excerpt from *Questions God Asks Us*, pp. 124-25

It is astonishing enough that Jesus takes the role of a slave and washes the dirty feet of his disciples, but even more astounding is the fact that he does so knowing full well that they will all fail him miserably in his hour of greatest need. Jesus insists on washing the feet of Peter, knowing full well that Peter will deny him to save himself. What is more, Jesus stoops to wash the feet of Judas, knowing full well that Judas has already conspired to betray him to those seeking his life. John tells us in 13:2 that "the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus," and Jesus indicates several times in this chapter that he is fully aware of this reality (13:10-11, 18-19, 21-30). Yet even with Judas, Jesus' love remains unwavering. Jesus washes Judas' dirty feet along with all the others.

A Pattern to Follow

Jesus tells the disciples that what he has done is not only a gift, but an example. As he has washed their feet, they are to wash one another's feet (13:12-17). Note that this command is not given at beginning of the chapter. Jesus refrains from commanding them to show love to others until after they have received love from him. By washing the feet of others, they are called to share the love they have received from Christ.

"If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (13:14-15). This specific example parallels the broader "new commandment" Jesus gives in verse 34: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Jesus' example suggests that loving as he has loved means taking the role of a servant, caring for the needs of others without expecting anything in return. His example suggests that we are to do this not only for those who treat us well, but even for those who disappoint and hurt and betray us.

Craig Koester writes: "The directive to wash one another's feet is a call to share the kind of love that startles and surprises. It is a call for love to show up when no one might expect it. God put all things into Jesus' hands, and Jesus did the unexpected by stooping down and using his hands to wash feet. The followers of Jesus, too, have been entrusted with abilities and opportunities. The example of foot washing is a call to do what is needed, not merely expected, a call to translate love into service that might even catch someone off guard."

We would do well to pause and think deeply about these words, and consider their meaning for our lives. They appear nowhere else in any of the four Gospels. There is nothing optional about them. They are clear, direct, and personal. If we want to experience the life God gives, we must follow Jesus' example and wash one another's feet.

Of course, Jesus' foot-washing example points us toward a greater challenge than merely doing small things for others. It is far more challenging to become a servant in heart and mind, to lay down our lives in the service of the servant-king who gave his life on the cross for every human being. Jesus' action is revolutionary. When he knelt at the feet of his disciples, he was modeling a new way of being; a completely new attitude toward life; a new way of loving and serving our families, our friends, our colleagues, and even our enemies. I have yet to grasp all the implications of his action for my life. Have you?

Excerpt from *Questions God Asks Us*, pg. 126-28

Upside-Down Authority

Hudson reminds us that when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, he "turned upside down our understanding of the exercise of authority." The point is that, for us as for Jesus, we should be looking away from ourselves, and at the world we are supposed to be serving.

Our participation in the vulnerable, live-giving love of God begins with Jesus before us, humbling himself and us. It is in pouring ourselves out in love as Jesus has done and as he makes possible in us that we become able to function as his servants, his sent ones, his friends, reflections of his light in the dark world God loves.

Jesus invites us to exercise leadership and authority in a radically new way.... Upside-down authority is how I describe it—an authority not found in a high position or fancy title but in a towel and a basin.

How do you and I exercise out authority? Do we throw our weight around, or do we lead with a spirit of humility? Do we come across as superior or as persons seeking to serve? These are important concerns, especially if we want to follow Jesus. All of us, to some degree or another, have some form of leadership responsibility: in the home, the workplace, the church, or the wider community. How we lead and serve in these places indicates more than anything else our real answer to Jesus' question, "Do you understand what I have done for you?"

Excerpt from *Questions God Asks Us*, pg. 128-29

As we begin to answer Jesus' question, let us first thank God for the radical act of service Jesus performed for his disciples in washing their feet, and ask that he would show us what it looks like to follow his example in our lives. Let us pray that he would help us and all Christians show love to one another as he has loved us, so that the world might come to believe in Christ and know his deep love and friendship.

Answering God's Question²

"Do you understand what I have done for you?" How do we begin to answer Jesus' question? We live in a pyramid-shaped society that makes it difficult for us to grasp the full implications of his foot-washing action. It directly opposes the way we are taught the world works. Every day our culture bombards us with messages like: "Work your way to the top." "Look out for yourself." "Show them who's boss." "Be in control." When these ideas and others like them become part and parcel of our thinking, it is very hard to take seriously someone who kneels down and washes feet. So how can we go about answering the question? Here a few simple suggestions:

1. First of all, if you really do struggle with the Gospel story, it may help to share your feelings with God. Be open and say, *"Lord, I do not find it easy to understand what you have done. It seems to go against so much of what I have learned about living in this world. But I do want to try to understand what you meant when you washed your disciples' feet. Will you please shed some light on this moment in your life, so that I may come to see you more clearly, know you more deeply, and follow you more closely."* I have found that being honest in this way can often lead us deeper in our relationship with God.
2. Take some time to be quiet. Ask God to be near. Read the Gospel story about the foot washing through a few times. Allow the story to come alive in your imagination. Picture yourself sitting with the disciples in the upper room. See Jesus wash their feet. Finally he kneels before you, takes your feet, and places them in his basin. Be aware of your thoughts and feelings as he washes them. When he finishes, he looks up at you and asks, *"Do you understand what I have done for you?"* Enter into conversation with him from your heart.
3. As Jesus himself put it after he had asked the question, *"Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."* What is God challenging you to do? When will you do it? May you know the blessing that comes from following the foot-washing Christ.

Discussion

1. Has someone ever washed your feet? What was it like?
2. Do you find it easier to serve or be served? Why?
3. How does Jesus' teaching and example in John 13 challenge the way our world works today? How does it challenge the way we often understand our own role in serving him and those around us?
4. What excites you or scares you most about following the servant-pattern of Jesus?
5. If someone asked you how they can begin to live Jesus' example in a way that genuinely communicates to the world how much he has loved them, what would you say? What does this look like in your life? And what are some small steps that each of us can take?

² Excerpted from *Questions God Asks Us*, pp. 130-31

