

## CLOTHE YOURSELF WITH HUMILITY

*13 It was just before the Passover Feast. Knowing that his hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father, and having loved his own who were in the world, [Jesus now] loved them to the fullest extent. 2It was during supper, and the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray [Jesus]. 3Knowing that the Father had put all things under his authority, and that he had come forth from God and was returning to God, 4[Jesus] got up from the supper table and laid aside his robe. He took a towel and wrapped it around his waist. 5Then he poured water into the basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. 6So he came to Simon Peter, but [Peter] said to him, Lord, are you going to wash my feet? 7Jesus replied, You do not now understand what I am doing; but later you will understand. 8Peter said to him, You shall never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I do not wash you, you have no part with me. 9Simon Peter responded, Lord, not only my feet, but [wash] my hands and my head also. 10Jesus said to him, He who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet and he is wholly clean. And you are clean, but not every one [of you]. 11[Jesus] knew who would betray him; that is why he said, Not everyone of you is clean. 12After he had washed their feet and put back on his robe, he sat down again. Then he asked them, Do you understand what I have done to you? 13You call me, Teacher, and, Lord: and you speak correctly; that is what I am. 14If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15I have given you an example, you also should do as I have done to you. 16I tell you the truth, a servant is not greater than his master; neither is an apostle greater than the one who sent him. 17If you understand these things, you will be blessed if you do them. (Jn. 13:1-17)*

### **Introduction**

A Christian lady writes,

Some time ago I heard a Sunday morning sermon that not only stirred my imagination but also challenged me down in the very deepest part of my inner being. Has that ever happened to you? I couldn't get it out of my mind. It was one of those moments when my eyes were opened just a little bit more to God's truth. And it burst into my soul like the sun's rays breaking through on a foggy morning.

The subject was the incident of Jesus washing the disciples' feet as recorded in the Gospel of John. It was the evening of the last Passover. Jesus, we are told, moved with compassion for His disciples, removed His robe, and washed their feet. He then wiped them with a towel. After the conversation between Peter and Jesus in which Jesus conveys the meaning of their feet being washed, He said, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done to you."

Of course, the thought that struck me that Sunday morning was, "When have I washed someone's feet?" Over the days that followed I silently pondered the

question and my own life. In all honesty I must admit I was not pleased with what I saw. I had been programmed constantly to “Watch out for Number One,” “Take care of yourself,” “Be successful,” “Don’t be a doormat.” My mind so easily fell into the pattern of thinking, “*How does this affect me? Does this improve my image? Watch out for yourself, no one else will.*” This period of introspection was the beginning of a change in my life. (POWER, 10/15/89, p. 4)

We need to appreciate the humility of the Son of God—we ourselves need to be the recipients of His humble service, and, as His disciples, we need to imitate that humble service in our own lives. Because the Son of God clothed Himself with humility for our sake, we, likewise, must clothe ourselves with humility to serve Him and to serve others in His name.

### **I. Clothe Yourself with Humility, Being Assured of Your Identity in Christ**

Jesus is described as undertaking this humble service of foot washing with complete consciousness of and confidence in His identity. Jesus knew “*the Father had put all things under his authority*” (vs. 3;) that is to say, the Father had made Him to be Lord over all. Jesus knew “*he had come forth from God*” (vs. 3;) He was fully aware of His identity as the Son of God, fully aware of His deity and His divine dignity. Jesus knew that He was “*returning to God.*” By means of the cross and the resurrection, He would return to the presence of God and the divine glory He shared with the Father throughout all of eternity, the glory of which He speaks in John 17:5, “*Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.*”

In one sense, Jesus undertook this humble act of service **despite** His consciousness of His true identity as the eternal Son of God, possessing divine dignity and equality with God the Father. As the Apostle Paul testifies of Him, “*Christ Jesus, ... existing in the form of God, did not consider the being on an equality with God a thing to be exploited*” (Phil. 2:6.) In another sense, Jesus was enabled to undertake this humble act of service **because of** His consciousness of His true identity: He knew that He was the eternal Son of God, possessing divine dignity and equality with God the Father. Consequently, this humble act of service was not a threat to Him: He did not suffer from a sense of insecurity or a fear of loss—He knew who He was and what the Father had given Him, and this knowledge and confidence gave Him the freedom to serve. Note, again, the comments of that Christian lady who was so very deeply affected by this account of Jesus’ humble service:

... the thought that struck me that Sunday morning was, “*When have I washed someone’s feet?*” Over the days that followed I silently pondered the question and my own life. In all honesty I must admit I was not pleased with what I saw. I had been programmed constantly to “Watch out for Number One,” “Take care of yourself,” “Be successful,” “Don’t be a doormat.” My mind so

easily fell into the pattern of thinking, “How does this affect me? Does this improve my image? Watch out for yourself, no one else will.”

What is the mentality and the outlook of the world? *Climb to the top and then guard your gains; it's very precarious up there, you can so very easily stumble all the way back to the bottom.* One day a young United States congressman stepped into an elevator in the Capitol building. As the elevator made its ascent, he engaged in conversation with the operator. The young congressman was shocked to learn that this elevator operator had once been a United States congressman, but now he was reduced to the position of operating an elevator in the Capitol building. The young man vowed that such would never happen to him, and he lived in constant fear that it would. *Cultivate your image, enhance your image, do nothing that will diminish your image; watch out for yourself, because no one else will.*

But as Christians, we can clothe ourselves with humility—without regard for our personal identity or dignity—because our identity is established and is secure in Christ:

*All things are yours; <sup>22</sup>whether ... the world or life or death or the present or the future—all is yours, <sup>23</sup>and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God. (1 Cor. 3:21-23)*

*Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things, <sup>3</sup>for you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup>When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Col. 3:2-4)*

Being conscious and confident of our identity in Christ, we can be free from the fears that shackle men to cautious inactivity and the preservation of their own self-image. Christian, if you remember your identity in Christ and your calling as a disciple of Christ, you need not worry about such matters as preserving and improving your status—you can be free to be like Christ and live like Christ.

## **II. Clothe Yourself with Humility, By Submitting Yourself to Christ’s “Foot Washing”**

Note that before the Lord Jesus Christ called upon His disciples to join Him in performing such humble service, He first called upon them to become the recipients of the humble service He was performing.

It is difficult to follow the example of Christ and perform such humble service for others, but it is perhaps even more difficult to become the recipient of Christ's own humble service. Peter found this to be the case. Peter is astonished and indignant: before him stoops the Lord of glory, half-naked, performing the task reserved for the most menial household slave—and Peter himself is the object of this act of service! (vs. 6) Peter will not tolerate such a display of humility, he cannot conceive of himself being the recipient of such a service being performed

by none other than the Son of God (vs. 8.) Peter was, no doubt, zealous to preserve his Lord's dignity and prevent Him from disgracing Himself. Peter also was too proud to allow himself to be the recipient of such humble service as that which his Lord now offered him. Translated into contemporary terms, it is the thought that says, "I can't believe that I am in such an awful condition that it would require the Son of God to have to go to the cross of Calvary in order to save me."

Jesus must now confront Peter with the truth: *"If I do not wash you, you have no part with me"* (vs. 8b.) Note the change from "wash your feet" to "wash you," indicating that Jesus is looking beyond the foot washing to the cross. This present act of foot washing is symbolic of the humble act of soul washing that Christ will perform by means of His death upon the cross. Jesus declares, "If you do not humble yourself to receive the foot washing (symbolic of the soul cleansing) I offer, you will have no part with Me in My kingdom."

At this point Peter blurts out, *"Lord, not only my feet, but [wash] my hands and my head also!"* (vs. 9.) Although he does not fully understand what Jesus is doing and all that it means, out of love for Jesus and not being able to bear even the thought of being separated from Jesus, Peter submits himself to Jesus' humble ministry. Here is true submission to the Lord Jesus Christ: a submission of body, mind, and pride—a submission even though there is not complete understanding, a submission because it is unthinkable to live without Christ and be separated from Him.

Before we can clothe ourselves with humility to serve others in the name of Christ, we must first humble ourselves to become the recipient of Christ's own profoundly humble act of service: He offers Himself to us as our Savior, having first offered Himself to God as the perfect payment for our sins:

*... he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment was laid upon him for our peace, and by his wounds we are healed. <sup>6</sup>We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but Jehovah has laid upon him the iniquity of us all.* (Isa. 53:5-6)

The hymn writer, Augustus Toplady, expresses well what it means to be the humble recipient of Christ's ministry:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,  
let me hide myself in Thee.  
Let the water and the blood,  
from Your pierced side that flowed,  
Be of sin the double cure,  
cleanse me from its guilt and power.

Nothing in my hand I bring,  
simply to Your cross I cling.  
Naked, come to You for dress,  
helpless, look to You for grace;  
Foul, I to the Fountain fly;  
wash me, Savior, or I die.

### III. Clothe Yourself with Humility, By Following the Example of the Lord Jesus

In verses 4-5 John very graphically and dramatically describes Jesus' action: Jesus rises from the supper table and takes off His outer garment (What is He about to do?) He picks up a large towel and wraps it around His waist (What is He doing!) Now He is pouring water into the basin used for foot washing. Now He is getting down on His hands and knees and He then proceeds to wash His disciples' feet!

The time of this act—occurring during supper—calls special attention to its significance. It was customary for a menial household slave to wash the guests' feet when they first entered the home. In the absence of such a slave it was the responsibility of the guest to wash his own feet. Certainly no one could ever expect the master of the house to perform such a lowly act of service! But here is the Lord of glory stooping down to perform this most menial chore.

The timing of this act must have proven to be most disconcerting and embarrassing to the disciples. According to Luke 22:24, it was at this very time that the disciples had been disputing which one of them was the greatest:

*... they prepared the Passover. <sup>14</sup>When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table ... <sup>24</sup>Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. (Lk. 22:13-14,24)*

Now, with this dispute still in the air, the Lord Himself assumes the position of the most menial slave! The room must have been filled with absolute stillness. Suddenly, the disciples' whole conception of greatness—their conception of the character and behavior of greatness—was shaken to its foundations as they witnessed the Lord of glory stooping down to perform the lowliest task of service. Their whole conception of greatness was about to be demolished and rebuilt, note Luke 22:25-27,

*Jesus said to them, The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. <sup>26</sup>But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves—<sup>27</sup>for who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. (Lk. 22:25-27)*

When He had finished washing their feet, Jesus declared,

*You call me, Teacher, and, Lord: and you speak correctly; that is what I am. <sup>14</sup>If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup>I have given you an example, you also should do as I have done to you.* (Jn. 13:13-15)

The Christian lady who was so impressed by the sermon on this incident of Jesus washing His disciples' feet, asked the LORD to show her how she might put this commandment into practice. What He showed her may well serve as stimulating examples for us as well ...

I asked the LORD to show me someone whose feet I could wash. It wasn't long before He did. A librarian at my school was taken ill quite suddenly. For days she lay in bed, racked with searing pain. I called her one afternoon to comfort, to encourage.

"Is there anything I can do?" I asked, trying to think what her needs might be.

"No, not that I can think of," she politely responded.

And then an idea came to me. "Why, June, I'll be glad to come and clean your bathroom."

"That would be wonderful!" I heard her voice choke.

So a few hours later I arrived at her home, armed with buckets, scrubbing brushes, and disinfectants. On my knees I scrubbed and cleaned. It was not fun, but all the time my heart was singing with joy because God had shown me a specific way to serve. God had used me to meet her need.

Now I long to live out a life of service. It's easy to forget, to slip back into the old patterns of thinking. But the sheer emptiness of that way of life demands that I change.

Sometimes it's just putting an arm around another who is ready to call it quits. Sometimes it's writing a note to someone who has experienced a severe loss. Oftentimes it's service that goes unnoticed. No trumpets play. No newsmen are in attendance. But my Father sees and that's enough.

Washing feet sometimes hurts. A friend of mine faithfully cares for her aged mother who no longer recognizes her, no longer even knows her name. But that does not diminish the love with which she serves each day. Love does not seek its own. It looks for ways to give itself away.

Not long ago, I was asked to play the piano for a special occasion. I was delighted to be asked. But then I realized that another woman, who also plays well, rarely is given such opportunity. I quietly declined, suggesting that this other member be asked first. It was hard to do, but I felt it was what Jesus would do. The other woman did accept, and she did a wonderful job. It was a golden moment for her, and my inner joy overflowed.

I'm learning the art of washing feet, though at times I still feel as if I'm in the beginner course. I have so much to learn. But my commitment to God, I now see, is being expressed in understandable language through my relationships with people. He has given me a fresh new song to sing every day.

While I am still learning the art of washing feet, it has brought a fresh perspective and a new purpose to my life. I find myself seeing people and their circumstances in a different light. Their needs become in a sense my needs. For example, there is a very elderly man who lives in a nursing home in my community. I came to know him through a mutual friend. He has few visitors and his days seem to stretch from morning to evening. He's crippled not only in body but also in spirit. Gradually this man with the snow-white hair and wrinkled face has become an important part of my life. Even though he is not a relative. I try to visit him regularly, sometimes taking a piece of cake or a magazine. I do not visit because it's fun. On the contrary, the smells that greet me when I enter the home almost chase me away. And the difficulty I have getting him to converse is frustrating. But my white-haired friend needs to have human contact. And most of all, he needs the LORD. I know that God loves him and cares. So I visit and I pray. The wonder of it all is that in my obedience to wash feet, my joy breaks forth. I couldn't do it without God. Through this contact I have grown sensitive to the needs of the elderly, and I hunger more to be used by the LORD. (*POWER*, 10/15/89, pp. 4-6)

As disciples of Christ, we should ask ourselves such questions as, "Do I know of someone who is in pain and who needs my service? Do I know of someone who is discouraged and needs encouragement? Do I know of someone who is lonely and who needs my love? Do I know of a Christian whose gifts are ignored and who needs to have those gifts become recognized so that they may be employed for the glory of God?"

## **Conclusion**

Let us clothe ourselves with humility, being assured of our identity in Christ. Let us clothe ourselves with humility, having first submitted ourselves to become the recipient of Christ's own humble service rendered for us upon the cross of Calvary. Let us clothe ourselves with humility, by following the example of our Lord Jesus.

In John 13:17 Jesus declares, *“If you understand these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”* Do you know something of the blessing of which He speaks? That Christian lady does:

On my knees I scrubbed and cleaned. It was not fun, but all the time my heart was singing with joy because God had shown me a specific way to serve ... Now I long to live out a life of service. It's easy to forget, to slip back into old patterns of thinking. But the sheer emptiness of that way of life demands that I change ... The other woman accepted the invitation to play the piano, and she did a wonderful job. It was a golden moment for her, and my inner joy overflowed ... my commitment to God, I now see, is being expressed in understandable language through my relationships with people. He has given me a fresh new song to sing every day ... The wonder of it all is that in my obedience to wash feet, my joy breaks forth ... I hunger more to be used by the LORD.