

Foot-washing – a paradigm for growth
A Sermon by Rt. Rev. David Lindrooth
4/19/2026

Jesus laid aside His garments, took a linen 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. (John 13:4,5)

The Heavenly Doctrines teach that there is a false (but unfortunately, attractive) idea that it doesn't matter what a person does while they live on earth, since they leave their earthly body (and earthly actions) behind. The thought is that only that which "is of the spirit or mind" matters because that is what follows a person after death. While it is true that a person's mistakes or actions done out of ignorance or by accident do not determine the quality of a person's life after death, one's earthly choices matter because they have important spiritual implications.

It is helpful to remember that if one's natural life were meaningless, then the Lord wouldn't have needed to put us on earth in the first place. Instead, we could be directly inserted into heaven without spending any time on earth. But that wasn't the Lord's plan. He created us to live in the natural world because our experiences here in this external life are necessary to provide the foundation we will use for eternal life in heaven. Our memories of all the experiences of this life provide us with the "spiritual flesh and bones" that we need for our angelic bodies. In addition, our actions here and our choices in the physical world form us and shape us into either angels who are open to receiving the Lord's eternal life, or evil spirits who have chosen to reject that life in favor of pursuing self-interest. Our life, our experiences, and the choices that we make while here on earth matter.

A colleague of mine recently stated, "At some point, we all must realize that we actually really do need the Lord in our lives!" This simple statement struck me as an illustration of the importance of the story of foot-washing. The Lord said to Peter, "**Unless I wash your [feet], you can have no part in Me (Jn 13:8).**" Like Peter, we need to come to understand that we need to partner with the Lord in the ins and outs of our daily physical worldly lives and turn to Him for help as we purify our external life in preparation for the next.

As a general overarching principle, the Arcana Caelestia teaches that foot-washing represents the Lord coming to us in the most earthly, external aspects of life. He was born in a physical body. He walked the earth, breathed the air, and beheld the beauty of a star-studded sky. And through His life on earth, He was able to defeat and reject hell as it appeared and attacked Him in the lowest aspects of life. And because He defended

Himself against the hells in these outermost levels, He is also available to help and protect us today when we most need Him.

Specifically, the story focuses on partnering with the Lord for our “spiritual washing” or purification. The feet represent the outermost aspects of human life, while washing is an ancient representation meaning the cleansing of evils. In the ancient world, people walked streets that were dusty, dirty, and sometimes muddy in sandals. As a result, they would get filthy feet – feet that needed washing when one came indoors. And typically, in a wealthy home, one’s slave would wash the feet of a person entering the home.

We start to see the significance of this story when we reflect that a person stands and walks on their feet, supporting the entire physical body. One needs to care for their feet. Similarly, our “spiritual bodies” are entirely supported by the external life - represented here by our feet. The choices we make while we live here on earth form that spiritual foundation. Everything we do on earth forms ‘the feet’ of our angelic bodies. Like the feet of the ancients who have been walking in the dirty streets, our ‘spiritual feet’ -that life that supports the interior life need care and cleansing.

The Lord telling Peter that he needs to allow Him to wash his feet is, in part, a reference to our need for faith to be present and useful in our external, worldly life, not just in our internal reflections. We are taught that a faith that is only present in one’s interior thoughts, and doesn’t manifest itself in our actions, doesn’t really support a person’s regeneration.

But why are our choices in this world so important if we are going to one day leave this world and take up life in the Spiritual world? The Heavenly Doctrines explain that if we allow evil behaviors, justified by false thinking, to be present in our actions, then, as the Lord’s love and wisdom flow into us and descend, that life is perverted when it comes into contact with those external behaviors. The Lord’s life flowing into us is then perverted and destroyed, and we lose its benefit. This might be compared to a person allowing his feet to become so dirty and smelly that they infect and make him, and those around him, sick.

The Heavenly Doctrines point out that the effects of external disorders in our lives are described in another analogy in an Old Testament story. Specifically, the negative effects of an unclean external life are compared to the plague of flies that descended on the Egyptians described in Exodus.

We are told that this plague of flies was not just a cloud of ordinary house flies, but was an endless swarm of ‘noxious’ biting flies that were poisonous. The imagery is important because it describes the relentless spiritual chaos and misery caused by living a life that indulges and justifies evil external behaviors.

Like a plague of flies, compulsive false thoughts generated by a corrupt external life constantly distract us, making it impossible to focus on a life of use. They rob us of our rest

by keeping us up at night. They focus us on our own ‘pains’ and dissatisfactions, making it impossible to pay attention to others.

And they are truly endless. Like a plague of flies, we can try to swat at them, but millions more instantly replace them.

We can see an example of this in the commandment “**Thou shalt not murder**”. While it is generally recognized that we should not murder our neighbors – a teaching that is well known in every civilized nation- we are also warned not to harbor forms of hatred that mirror murder. The thoughts that arise from that hatred are endless and are a form of a plague that envelops us and immerses us in selfish thoughts, which drive us away from those whom we love. And because these thoughts are produced by the hordes of evil spirits in hell, we are overwhelmed when we try to swat them away on our own.

The same can be true even for simple “seemingly harmless” obsessions that, while relatively benign, constantly suck up all the attention that we might be able to give to others. We might be addicted to some substance or drug, or we might be obsessed with some distracting habit which, though relatively harmless, draws us away from those around us.

The Heavenly Doctrines describe these external obsessions as a plague because their falsities behave exactly like the flies, making it impossible to focus on living a healthy life. And the biggest problem is that they don’t ‘go away’ on their own. To think we, of ourselves, have the power to control these plagues, is to think we have the strength to stand against all the forces of hell.

In the story of the Lord’s washing the disciples’ feet, He is telling us that with the right engagement with Him, He can remove these plagues in our lives and replace them with His own sense of peace.

Remember the main points of the story.

- Jesus girds himself in a linen towel to wash the disciples’ feet.
- Peter says he would not allow Jesus to wash his feet, thinking it would be demeaning to the Lord.
- Then Jesus says, unless He washes Peter’s feet, Peter will have no relationship with Him
- Peter responds that he wants Jesus to wash not just his feet but also his head and hands.
- But Jesus says that only the feet are to be washed because he has already been bathed – and he will be completely clean.
- And finally, Jesus commands them to wash each other’s feet

One has to love Peter's enthusiasm. But the real power of the story is its inner meaning as a story about how the Lord changes us in preparation for heaven.

If you listen closely to the story, it speaks of two parts of our spiritual change. First, there is the notion that one who has already bathed needs only to wash his feet. This refers to the internal work that comes first in the life of regeneration. One needs to begin repentance by examining the quality of one's thoughts and intentions. The Lord emphasizes the importance of this in his dialogue with the Pharisees in the lesson read from Matthew. If we, like the cup mentioned there, have filthy interiors full of "**extortion and self-indulgence**" even if we appear to be clean, we are closed off from being able to receive the Lord's life(Matt 23:25).

The Heavenly Doctrines state it this way: "**The spiritual part of a person is shut unless the natural part is regenerated. And [then] that spiritual part is, as it were, blind to the truths and goods of faith and love**" (NJHD 186). So, the Lord asks us to identify and shun our impure thoughts as the first step in our repentance. But the Lord insists that we take this further by partnering with Him to purify our actions in external life as well. This external level is what is meant by allowing Him to (figuratively) wash our feet.

By this, the Lord reassures us that when we turn to Him in His Word and take the teachings that we find there to apply them to our lives, by living according to those teachings, He removes the evils clinging to us that plague us.

This is very tenderly pictured in the story with the way the Lord removed His own garments, girding Himself with a linen cloth and washing the disciples' feet with water and wiping them with the cloth. The relationship expressed here seems extraordinarily intimate, with the Lord being directly and fully present with His loving desire to care for us when in spiritual need. This is pictured by Him girding Himself with the white linen cloth. It is a statement of the power of love that exists within the truths that the Lord offers our lives. When we turn to Him directly in His Word and invite Him to show us how His truths help us love others, with a willingness to live in ways that reflect those truths, the Lord is powerfully and closely present. We can be moved and strengthened by the Love that He offers us, and we can use His power to stand against the powers of hell.

The story is a surprisingly complete description of how to follow the Lord. While purification is the focus, the Lord also says: "**If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet, for I have given you an example that you should do as I have done to you** (John 13:14,15). The teaching is reminiscent of the Golden Rule: **that whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets** (Matt. 7:12).

Here, the Lord deepens His partnership with us, helping us with our purification – helping us to live a heavenly life within the community of the Church. Note here that the purpose of our turning away from the disorders of evil is to be able to live usefully with others. To be able to share the qualities of heaven with those around us so that they, too,

can see and enjoy the beauty of a heavenly life. And this requires our interactions with others within the community of the church.

The story of the foot-washing in the New Testament shows how we ‘ground’ ourselves in a relationship with the Lord so we can make full use of His life. It is a story that helps us understand how to open ourselves to the incredible power of the Lord and allow that power to repel the plagues of obsessive falsehoods and bad habits in our lives. And it is also a story that invites peace and the humanity of heaven to be present in even the outermost parts of our lives.

We will close with one final powerful image from the Lord’s Word describing this grounding relationship that the Lord offers all who are willing to follow Him. In Genesis, Jacob is walking alone in the desert at night. He is tired. He finds a stone and lays down with his head on the stone and sleeps. That night, he dreams that the Lord has placed a ladder by his side with steps up to heaven. There are angels traveling down from the Lord to him and then back up.

Jacob represents the people of the Lord’s church who, even in the wastelands of life, turn to Him to find peace and consolation. And they know that He is there, leading, watching, protecting, healing, and offering His love to all who are willing to receive it. Jacob awakes and says: **“Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it... “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!” (Genesis 28:16,17)**

Amen.

Lessons:

John 13:1-20

Matthew 23: 25-28; 37-39

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153. I have often marveled that although the entire Christian world knows that evils are to be shunned as sins, that otherwise they are not forgiven, and that unless sins are forgiven there is no salvation, still scarcely one out of thousands is aware of this. Inquiry into this was made in the spiritual world, and it was found to be so.

Indeed everyone in the Christian world knows this from the prayers recited before those who attend the Holy Supper, for it is openly declared in these; and yet when people are asked whether they are aware of it, they reply that they are not and have not been. The reason is that they have not thought about it, and most say that they have thought only of faith and of salvation by it alone.

I have also marveled as well that faith alone has so closed their eyes that when people who have confirmed themselves in that faith read the Word, they see nothing that is said there about love, charity and works. It is as though they have painted their faith over all the contents of the Word, like one who paints a manuscript with tempera, so that nothing that lies underneath appears, or if something does appear, it is swallowed up by their faith and said to be faith.