

Wise Kindness: Washing One Another's Feet

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You call me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. I have given an example that you should do as I have done to you. (John 13:15)

Throughout His whole life, the Lord gave us an example of serving others. He has called us to love our neighbors, to serve them. How do we follow His example? He said, "you should do as I have done to you." When He said these words, He was specifically referring to washing the disciple's feet. In a broader sense His example refers to all that He did for them. He didn't say, "I have taught you, now teach as I have taught." Teaching was part of His example, but not enough. Merely hearing the truth is not enough. He didn't say, "I have shown you right thinking, think as I do." Right thinking was part of His example, but not enough. Merely having the right ideas is not enough. He said ". . .you should do as I have done to you." He calls us to live a life of service, a life of charity, a life of wise kindness.

Many times during His life the Lord used natural language in the form of parable to teach of higher realities. Likewise, in this case, the mere external action of washing feet would not by itself produce salvation, just as baptism though a very important sacrament, does not produce salvation either. The teachings for the New Church present some ideas that can direct our thinking to the higher reality that the Lord would like us to make a part of our lives. Washing meant a purifying from evil loves and false ideas. The linen towel which was used to wipe the feet represented truth from the Lord. The reason why only the feet of the disciples needed to be washed was that their feet represented the whole of their natural life--their natural motivations, their thoughts, their words and deeds. Overall this act of foot-washing represents a person's spiritual rebirth or regeneration (*Arcana Caelestia* 10243).

While in an absolute sense a person's regeneration is accomplished by the Lord alone, we can play a very important role in helping the Lord do His work. It is this role that the Lord calls us to by His example of foot-washing. It is an image of the work of charity that the Lord would like us to pursue daily. So the question is, "What is charity or a life of wise kindness?"

Now if spiritual washing represents purifying a person from evil loves and false ideas would any of us be following the Lord's suggestion if we spent our lives considering our family and acquaintances and carefully explaining what we think their major faults and flaws are? Or perhaps we could go out from today's service with the instruction to try to notice and point out the faults and flaws of at least five people each day this week?

As you listen to those ideas, you probably recognize that there is something distasteful in them. The primary effort of a Christian life should not be to denounce others, even though there are countless examples of Christians who seem to have assumed this self-righteous task as their right and even duty.

An important part of the Lord's washing of the disciples' feet was that it was a very humble act. Washing of feet was a job usually done by one of the lowliest servants. Yet the Lord said to His disciples:

You call me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, 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 13:13-15

Before we rush off to righteously denounce others, we can remember the Lord's injunction to first cast the beam out of our own eye so that we may see clearly to cast the speck of dust from the eye of another person (Matthew 7:3-5). But when the Lord gave us this instruction did He really mean that we are to mind our own business until we are perfect? What is the role the Lord wants us to play that falls between the crusader who righteously denounces others and the person who apparently pays no notice whatsoever of the flaws within others?

Firstly it would do us well to remember that if we consistently think and feel critical thoughts of others that this is a flaw within ourselves that we want to work on. Hear the following from the *Arcana Caelestia*:

People with whom faith is separated from charity see nothing else but errors and perversities residing with a person. But those who have faith that is connected to charity are different. They notice the good things, and if they do see evil things and false ideas they excuse them, and if possible, endeavor with that person to correct them. (*Arcana Caelestia* 1079)

Notice those final words, "and if possible, endeavor with that person to correct them." It is the wise pursuit of this effort that the Lord calls us to with His example of foot washing.

The Lord constantly works to help us, as individuals, to see the truth and to freely choose to live according to it. Attempting to force a person to see the truth or do something good is not constructive. Listen to the following idea:

The Lord never compels any one. No one who is compelled to think what is true and do what is good is reformed, but instead thinks what is false all the more and wills evil all the more. All compulsion has this effect, as we may see from all the experience and lessons of life, which when learned proved two things--first, that human consciences do not allow themselves to be compelled, and second that we strive after what is forbidden. Moreover everyone desires to pass from non-freedom into freedom, for this belongs to each person's life. Hence it is evident that anything which is not from freedom, that is, which is not from what is spontaneous or voluntary, is not acceptable to the Lord. (*Arcana Caelestia*, paragraph 1947)

Didactically pointing out another's faults is more likely to motivate them to further self-justification and further harden them in their behavior than it is to bring about a positive change. This is not what the Lord meant by washing one another's feet.

Another passage in the *Arcana Caelestia* speaks of a further problem that arises if we too forcefully insist on our own view when talking with another.

One should not bind or incite another to confirm one's own truths but should hear him and take his answers as they are in himself. For he who binds and incites a person to confirm his own truths, causes that person not to think and speak from himself, but from him. And when anyone thinks and speaks from another, the truths he has are thrown into disorder, and yet he is not amended, except in the case of one who is as yet ignorant of these truths. (*Arcana Caelestia* 9213)

When we are trying to help others see for themselves what is true and to freely choose to follow this truth, we will not use compelling argument. We will not be righteously denouncing them. We also won't be solving their problems for them. If we are regularly suggesting to another what to do and not do, it subtly implies that we think that they are not competent to solve their own problems themselves. It can encourage a habit of not taking personal responsibility within them, and consequently can encourage them to bring all their significant problems to us.

What can we do to help others see the truth for themselves? We can “let our light shine before others.” We can have the words and deeds of our own lives witness to our best understanding of what is good and true. This is among the more powerful ways of teaching which leaves others in freedom to accept or reject for themselves. Sometimes we can ask questions that help a person focus on what is right and wrong. It is amazing how often the Lord uses questions in the stories of His Word--questions that help people reflect on what has happened or is happening. Sometimes the best thing we can do is to help a person see how his behavior has evoked a certain response within us. By mirroring how the person appears to us, it doesn't tell them that they must be different but helps them to see the impact of their words and deeds on another and then freely choose if that is what they want to be saying or doing.

Some people might still be inclined to say all of this irrelevant. We should just mind our own business and leave others to theirs. They might point out how hard it is to avoid a sense of hurt or anger when someone realizes that their words or deeds are flawed and that someone else may have noticed. You might say, “It's just not nice to give even the slightest effort to bringing about a change in another person's life.” In response to this idea we can go back to the Lord's words, “If I then, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet” and ask why does He care whether a person is flawed or not? He cares because people's evil loves and false ideas aren't good for themselves and they aren't good for others. These evils and falsities cause harm. Sometimes minor harm, sometimes they break out in terribly destructive ways, and sometimes they subtly poison a person's own life and the lives of the people around them. The Lord doesn't expect us to be perfect. He isn't condemning us because we aren't perfect. But He knows and wants us to know that these flaws will cause harm, will have negative consequences that can be focused and can be quite widespread.

On a spiritual level, more than anything else the Lord wants every person to have his or her feet washed by Him. This occurs when we freely acknowledge what is true and good and choose to be guided ever more clearly by this acknowledgement in what we think, say, and do. He is constantly working with infinite love and wisdom to bring this acknowledgement and life to us. And He calls for us to do our part, seeking His help to be as humble, and wise and loving as we can be. He has called us to service in the work of His Church. As He said to His disciples:

You call me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. I have given an example that you should do as I have done to you. John 13:15

Lessons: Isaiah 1:16-19, John 13:1-5, 12-17, *True Christian Religion* 422-423

Isaiah 1:16-19

¹⁶ "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, ¹⁷ Learn to do good; Seek justice, Rebuke the oppressor; Defend the fatherless, Plead for the widow. ¹⁸ "Come now, and let us reason together," Says the LORD, "Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool. ¹⁹ If you are willing and obedient, You shall eat the good of the land.

John 13:1-17

¹ 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. ² And supper being ended, the devil having already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's *son*, to betray Him, ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, ⁴ rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. ⁵ 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. . . . ¹² So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for *so* I am. ¹⁴ If I then, *your* Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. ¹⁷ If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

True Christian Religion 422-423 (portions)

Charity Itself (or a Wise Kindness) is Acting Justly and Faithfully in Our Position and Our Work and with the People with Whom We Interact

Charity itself is acting justly and faithfully in our position and our work, because all the things we do in this way are useful to the community; and usefulness is goodness, and goodness in an impersonal sense is our neighbor. . . . Charity is doing good to our neighbor daily and constantly - not only to our neighbor as an individual but also to our neighbor collectively. The only way to do this is through practicing goodness and justice in our position and work and with the people with whom we have any interaction, because these are things we do every day. When we are not doing them, they still stay in our minds all the time; we think about them and intend to do them. People who practice Charity in this way become better and better forms of Charity. Justice and faithfulness shape their minds and the practice of Charity shapes their bodies. Over time, because of their form, they get to the point where everything they want and think about relates to Charity. In the long run, they become like the people mentioned in the Word who have the law written on their hearts [Jeremiah 31:33]. Such people also take no credit for what they are doing since they are not thinking about receiving credit for it; they are thinking about their duty. In their view, acting this way is the right thing for citizens to do.