

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,
And many Explanatory Notes.

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JOHN XIII. 6-15.

<p>6 Then cometh he to Simon Peter: and Peter saith unto him, Lord, dost thou wash my feet?</p> <p>7 Jesus answered and said unto him, What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter.</p> <p>8 Peter saith unto him, thou shalt never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me.</p> <p>9 Simon Peter saith to him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.</p> <p>10 Jesus saith unto him, He that is washed needeth not save to wash <i>his</i> feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but</p>	<p>not all.</p> <p>11 For he knew who should betray him; therefore said he, Ye are not all clean.</p> <p>12. So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you?</p> <p>13 Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for <i>so</i> I am.</p> <p>14 If I then, <i>your</i> Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet.</p> <p>15 For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.</p>
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THE verses we have now read conclude the story of our Lord's washing the feet of His disciples, the night before He was crucified. It is a story full of touching interest, which for some wise reason no Evangelist records except St. John. The wonderful condescension of Christ, in doing such a menial action, can hardly fail to strike any reader. The mere fact that the Master should wash the feet of the servants might well fill us with surprise. But the circumstances and sayings which arose out of the action are just as interesting as the action itself. Let us see what they were.

We should notice, firstly, *the hasty ignorance of the Apostle Peter*. One moment we find him refusing to allow his Master to do such a servile work as He is about to do:—"Dost thou wash my feet?" "Thou shalt never wash my feet."—Another moment we find him rushing with characteristic impetuosity into the other extreme:—"Lord, wash not my feet only, but my hands and my head." But throughout the transaction we find him unable to take in the real meaning of what his eyes behold. He sees, but he does not understand.

Let us gather from Peter's conduct that a man may have plenty of faith and love, and yet be sadly destitute of clear knowledge. We must not set down men as graceless and godless because they are dull, and stupid, and blundering in their religion. The heart may often be quite right when the head is quite wrong. We must make allowances for the corruption of the understanding as well as of the will. We must not be surprised to find that the brains as well as the affections of Adam's children have been hurt by the fall. It is a humbling lesson, and one seldom fully learned except by long experience. But the longer we live the more true shall we find it, that a believer, like Peter, may make many mistakes and lack understanding, and yet, like Peter, have a heart right before God, and get to heaven at last.

Even at our best estate we shall find that many of Christ's dealings with us are hard to understand in this life. The "why" and "wherefore" of many a providence will often puzzle and perplex us quite as much as the wash-

ing puzzled Peter. The wisdom, and fitness, and necessity of many a thing will often be hidden from our eyes. But at times like these we must remember the Master's words, and fall back upon them:—"What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter." There came days, long after Christ had left the world, when Peter saw the full meaning of all that happened on the memorable night before the crucifixion. Even so there will be a day when every dark page in our life's history will be explained, and when, as we stand with Christ in glory, we shall know all.

We should notice, secondly, in this passage, *the plain practical lesson which lies upon its surface*. That lesson is read out to us by our Lord. He says, "I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you."

Humility is evidently one part of the lesson. If the only-begotten Son of God, the King of kings, did not think it beneath Him to do the humblest work of a servant, there is nothing which His disciples should think themselves too great or too good to do. No sin is so offensive to God, and so injurious to the soul as pride. No grace is so commended, both by precept and example, as humility. "Be clothed with humility." "He that humbleth himself shall be exalted."—"Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus; who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself." (1 Pet. v. 5; Luke xviii. 14; Phil. ii. 5-8.) Well would it be for the Church if this very simple truth was more remembered, and real humility was not so sadly rare. Perhaps there is no sight so displeasing in God's eyes as a self-conceited, self-satisfied, self-contented, stuck-up professor of religion. Alas, it is a sight only too common! Yet the words which St. John here records have never been repealed. They will be a swift witness against many at the last day, except they repent.

Love is manifestly the other part of the great practical lesson. Our Lord would have us love others so much that we should delight to do anything which can promote their happiness. We ought to rejoice in doing kindnesses, even in little things. We ought to count it a pleasure to lessen sorrow and multiply joy, even when it costs us some self-sacrifice and self-denial. We ought to love every child of Adam so well, that if in the least trifle we can do anything to make him more happy and comfortable, we should be glad to do it. This was the mind of the Master, and this the ruling principle of His conduct upon earth. There are but few who walk in His steps, it may be feared; but these few are men and women after His own heart.

The lesson before us may seem a very simple one; but its importance can never be overrated. Humility and love are precisely the graces which

the men of the world can understand, if they do not comprehend doctrines. They are graces about which there is no mystery, and they are within reach of all classes. The poorest and most ignorant Christian can every day find occasion for practicing love and humility. Then if we would do good to the world, and make our calling and election sure, let no man forget our Lord's example in this passage. Like Him, let us be humble and loving towards all.

We should notice, lastly, in this passage, *the deep spiritual lessons which lie beneath its surface*. They are three in number, and lie at the very root of religion, though we can only touch them briefly.

For one thing, we learn that all need to be washed by Christ. "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part in Me." No man or woman can be saved unless his sins are washed away in Christ's precious blood. Nothing else can make us clean or acceptable before God. We must be "washed, sanctified, and justified, in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Cor. vi. 11.) Christ must wash us, if we are ever to sit down with saints in glory. Then let us take heed that we apply to Him by faith, wash and become clean. They only are washed who believe.

For another thing, we learn that even those who are cleansed and forgiven need a daily application to the blood of Christ for daily pardon. We cannot pass through this evil world without defilement. There is not a day in our lives but we fail and come short in many things, and need fresh supplies of mercy. Even "he that is washed needs to wash his feet," and to wash them in the same fountain where he found peace of conscience when he first believed. Then let us daily use that fountain without fear. With the blood of Christ we must begin, and with the blood of Christ we must go on.

Finally, we learn that even those who kept company with Christ, and were baptized with water as His disciples, were "not all" washed from their sin. These words are very solemn,—“Ye are clean: but not all.” Then let us take heed to ourselves, and beware of false profession. If even Christ's own disciples are not all cleansed and justified, we have reason to be on our guard. Baptism and Churchmanship are no proof that we are right in the sight of God.

NOTES. JOHN XIII. 6-15.

6.—[*Then cometh he to Simon Peter.*] Whether our Lord began with Simon Peter, is not quite clear from the words before us. The word "then," however; certainly does not mean "then," in the sense of "in order."

Chrysostom and Theophylact hold that Jesus washed Judas Iscariot's feet, and then came to Peter. From the subsequent action of dipping and giving a morsel to Judas, it certainly seems probable that he sat very near our Lord.

Augustine holds that Jesus began with Peter. Bellarmine eagerly grasps at this, and gives it as one of twenty-eight alleged proofs that Peter always had a primacy among the Apostles!

[*And Peter saith unto him.*] The word "Peter" is not in the Greek text here, but simply

“he,” or “that man.” Our translators seem to have inserted it to make the meaning plain.

[*Lord, dost thou wash my feet?*] The English language here fails to give the full emphasis of the Greek. It would be literally rendered, “Dost Thou, of me, wash the feet?” Such an one as Thou art, wash the feet of such an one as I am? It is like John the Baptist’s exclamation when our Lord came to his baptism: “Comest thou to me?” (Matt. iii. 14.)

- 7.—[*Jesus answered and said, etc.*] The famous saying of this verse stretches far beyond the literal application of the words. Primarily, of course, it means, “This action of mine has a meaning which in a few minutes I will explain and you will understand, though at present it may seem to you strange and unsuitable.”—But in every age true Christians have seen a higher, deeper, broader meaning in the words, and a pious mind cannot doubt that they were intended to bear that meaning. It supplies the key to many things which we cannot understand in the providential government of the world, in the history of the Church, in the events of our own lives. We must make up our minds to see many things happening which we do not know and understand now, and of which we cannot at present see the wisdom. But we must believe that “we shall know hereafter” the full purposes, the why and wherefore and needs-be, of each and all. It is a golden sentence to store up in our memories. God’s eternal counsels, the wisdom of the great Head of the Church, must never be forgotten. All is going on well, even when we think all is going on ill. When we cannot see it we must believe. In sickness, sorrow, bereavement, disappointment, we must summon up faith and patience, and hear Christ saying to us, “What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter.”

Musculus has some happy remarks here on the applicability of this expression to infant baptism, which are most just and true.

- 8.—[*Peter saith...thou...never wash my feet.*] Here, again, the English version fails to give the full strength of the Greek words. This sentence would be rendered literally, “Thou shalt never wash my feet for ever,” or unto eternity.

We may note here, in Peter’s language, that there is such a thing as “a voluntary humility,” which runs into extremes.

Hutcheson remarks, “Men may have much seeming humility in the matters of God, which is yet but preposterous and sinful, and learned from carnal reason.” Rollock compares with Peter’s conduct here the Romish worship of saints and angels, under the pretence of deep humility and unworthiness to approach God.

[*Jesus answered...if I wash...not...no part...me.*] We need not doubt that this sentence was meant to bear a deep and full meaning, and to reach far beyond the primary application. It would be a very cold and tame exposition to say that our Lord only meant, “Unless thy feet are washed by Me tonight thou art not one of my disciples.”—It means a great deal more. Our Lord seems in effect to say, “Thou wilt not be wise to object to the symbolical action which I am performing. Remember no one can be saved, or have any part in Me and my work of redemption, unless I wash away his sins. Except I wash away thy many sins, even thou, Simon Peter, hast no part in Me. I must wash every saved soul, and every saved soul must be washed. Surely, therefore, it does not become thee to object to my doing an instructive and figurative act to thy feet, when I must needs do a far greater work to thy soul.”

The sentence is one of wide, deep, and sweeping application. It is true of every Christian of every rank and position. To each one Christ says, “If I wash thee not, thou hast no part in Me.” It is not enough that we are Churchmen, professed communicants, and the like. The great question for every one is this: “Am I washed and justified?”

The common assertion that this “washing” here spoken of is baptism, seems to me un-

warrantable. Our Lord never baptized any one, so far as we can learn from Scripture. [see John 4:2 "... (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples)"]. Where is it said that He baptized Peter? Moreover, if baptism were meant, the past tense would have been used: "If I had not washed thee, thou wouldst have no part in Me." The washing here spoken of is something far above baptism.

- 9.—[*Simon Peter saith, etc.*] The exclamation of Peter in this verse is highly characteristic of the man. Impulsive, excitable, zealous, ardent, with more love than knowledge, and more feeling than spiritual discernment, he is horrified at the very idea of "having no part in Christ." Anything rather than that! Not seeing clearly the deep meaning of His Master's words, and still sticking to a carnal, literal interpretation of the word "washing," he cries out that his Master may wash him all over, hands and head as well as feet, if an interest in Christ depends on that.

Great zeal and love are perfectly consistent with great spiritual ignorance and dullness, and great slowness to comprehend spiritual truth.

Rollock remarks that Peter erred as much in one extreme now, as he had erred before in another.

Stier remarks that the passionate, strong expression of Peter in this verse, is just the language of a warm-hearted but dull-minded disciple, just beginning to understand, as if light had suddenly flashed on him.

- 10.—[*Jesus saith to him, He that is washed, etc.*] This sentence of our Lord's conveys a latent rebuke of Peter's spiritual dullness. It is as though Jesus said, "The washing of head and hands whereof thou speakest is not needed. Even assuming that a literal washing is all I meant in saying, 'If I wash thee not,' it is well known that he who is washed needs only to wash his feet after a journey, and is accounted clean entirely after such a partial washing. But this is far more true of the washing of pardon and justification. He that is pardoned and justified by Me is entirely washed from all his sins, and only needs the daily forgiveness of the daily defilement he contracts in travelling through a sinful world. Once washed, justified and accepted by Me, ye are clean before God: although not all of you. There is one painful exception."

The great practical truth contained in this sentence ought to be carefully noted and treasured up by all believers. Once joined to Christ and cleansed in His blood, they are completely absolved and free from all spot of guilt, and are counted without blame before God. But for all this they need every day, as they walk through this world, to confess their daily failures, and to sue for daily pardon. They require, in short, a daily washing of their feet, over and above the great washing of justification, which is theirs the moment they first believe. He that neglects this daily washing is a very questionable and doubtful kind of Christian. Luther remarks pithily, "The devil allows no Christian to reach heaven with clean feet all the way."

"Every whit," in this verse, means literally "the whole man."

The deep mine of meaning which often lies under the surface of our Lord's language is strikingly exemplified in this verse, as well as in the seventh and eighth. There is far more in many of His sayings, we may believe, than has ever yet been discovered.

It is striking to observe that even of His poor, weak, erring disciples Jesus says, "Ye are clean."

Bullinger observes that the words of the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses," are a daily confession of the very thing here mentioned,—viz., the need of daily washing of our feet.

Casaubon remarks that those who come out of a bath, as a matter of constant experi-

ence, only need to wash their feet, which, stepping on the ground as they come out, must needs contract some defilement. In Eastern countries, where bathing was very common, all could see the force of this.

Hengstenberg remarks, that “the expression, ‘but not all,’ was intended to pierce the conscience of Judas, whom the Redeemer did not give up until the last good impulse died within him.”

The common idea that the “washing” here spoken of refers to the baptism, seems to me quite untenable. He that is washed must mean only “washed in a spiritual sense from his sins;” as Psalm li. 4. Hengstenberg’s discussion of the point is worth reading.

Burton observes, “The traitor, Judas, though washed by the hands of Christ Himself, was filthy still.”

- 11.—[*For he knew...betray him, etc.*] Our Lord’s perfect foreknowledge of His sufferings and the manner of them, and His thorough discernment of the real characters of all His disciples, are alike shown in this verse. He did not suffer because he did not foresee it, and was taken by surprise. He walked up to death knowing every step he was about to tread.

The sentence is an example of the explanatory glosses which are so characteristic of St. John’s Gospel.

The Greek words rendered “who should betray Him,” are literally, “the person betraying Him,” in the past participle.

- 12.—[*So after...washed...feet.*] After the conversation between our Lord and Peter, the washing seems to have gone on without interruption. The disciples were accustomed to see their Master do things they did not understand, and they submitted in silence.

[*And had taken...garments...set down again.*] This refers to His putting on again the long loose outer robe, which was laid aside on performing any action requiring exertion in the East. Then our Lord took His place once more at the table, and commenced a discourse which seems to have ushered in the Lord’s Supper. Whether the washing of the feet was meant, among other things, to teach the need of special preparation for that blessed ordinance, is an interesting thought, and worth consideration. It certainly seems our Lord’s last *action* before He gave the bread and wine.

[*He said...know ye what...done to you?*] This question was meant to stir up in the disciples’ minds inquiry as to the meaning of what they had just seen. Understanding and intelligent perception of all we do in religion, should be sought after and valued by all true Christians. There is no real religion in blind devotion. “What mean I by this service?” should be the question often impressed on our minds.

- 13.—[*Ye call me Master and Lord.*] These words would be more literally rendered, “Ye call Me, or speak of Me, as the Master and the Lord.” The expression seems to show that this was the habitual language of the disciples while our Lord was on earth. So Martha says to Mary, “The Master is come.” (John xi. 28.)

[*Ye say well: for so I am.*] The word “so” is not in the Greek. It is simply “for I am.” The expression is a beautiful warrant for applying to Jesus especially the appellation “the Lord.” He has Himself endorsed it, by the words, “Ye say well.”

- 14.—[*If I then, your Lord, etc.*] The argument of this verse is one which our Lord very frequently uses: “If I do a thing, much more ought ye to do it.” Literally rendered the meaning is, “If I, the Person whom ye speak of as ‘the Lord’ and ‘the Master,’ have washed your feet, and condescended to perform the most menial act of attention to you, ye also ought to feel it a duty to do acts of the same kind for one another,—acts as condescending as washing one another’s feet.”

The words “Your Lord and Master” in the Greek are literally, “The Lord and the Master.”

“Ye ought” is a very strong expression. It is tantamount to saying, “It is your duty and debt,—ye are under an obligation to do it.”

Paley on Evidences, p. 2, ch. iv., has a remarkable passage, showing the close affinity between our Lord’s conduct here, and His conduct when taking a little child and putting him in the midst of the disciples. In both he taught humility, that rare grace, by action.

15.—[*For I have given you an example, etc.*] “I have, in my own person, given you a pattern of what your own conduct should be. The duty I want you to learn is of such vast importance that I have not left it to a general precept, but have given you an example of my meaning.”

Of course the question at once rises,—What did our Lord really mean? Did he mean that we all ought literally to do the very same thing that He did? Or did he only mean that we are to imitate the spirit of his action?

The Church of Rome, it is well-known, puts a literal sense on our Lord’s language. Once every year, about Easter, the head of the Romish Church publicly washes the feet of certain poor persons got ready for the occasion. The absurdity, to say the least, of this view is evident on a moment’s reflection.

It seems absurd to take our Lord’s words literally, and to suppose that the Pope’s literal washing of a few feet at Easter can supersede the duty of all Christians to do the same. Yet it is only fair to remember that the Moravians to this day take a literal view of those words, and have a custom called “pedilavium.”

It is in any case absurd to suppose that our Lord would require His disciples to perform a duty which the young and the feeble would be physically unable to do.

It is inconsistent with the general tenor of our Lord’s teaching to suppose that He would ever attach so much importance to a mere bodily action. “Bodily exercise profiteth little.” (1 Tim. iv. 8.) A formal performance of bodily acts of religion is just the easiest thing that can be imposed on people. The thing that is really hard, and yet always required, is the service of the heart.

The true interpretation of the two verses is that which places a spiritual sense on our Lord’s words. It is a practical illustration of Matt. xx. 26-28. He wished to teach His disciples that they ought to be willing to wait on one another, serve one another, minister to one another, even in the least and lowest things. They should think nothing too low, or humble, or menial to undertake, if they can show love, kindness, and condescension to another. If He, the King of kings, condescended to leave heaven to save souls, and dwell thirty-three years in this sin-defiled world, there is nothing that we should think too lowly to undertake.

Pride, because we possess wealth, rank, position, place, education, or high-breeding, is condemned heavily in this passage. He who would shrink from doing the least kindness to the poorest Christian, has read these verses to little purpose, and does not copy his Master’s example.

One caution only we must remember. Let us not suppose that an ostentatious attention to the poor constitutes the whole of obedience to the law of this passage. It is easy work comparatively to care for the poor. We are to be ready to do the least acts of kindness to our equals quite as much as to the poor. There is nothing about temporal poverty in the passage. The disciples were told their duty to “one another.” This is a very important point. It is much easier and more self-satisfying to play the part and do the work of a Christian to the poor than to our equals.

How entirely the passage overthrows the claim of mere talking, head-learned professors of sound doctrine, to be accounted true Christians, it is needless to show. Doctrinal orthodoxy, without practical love and humility, is utterly worthless before God.

Bullinger remarks, how singularly full of Christian truth the passage is which ends at this verse. That we are washed clean from all sins, by Christ our Saviour,—that although washed, the remainder of infirmity sticks to us, and obliges us to wash our feet daily,—that the duty of a disciple is to make Christ his example in all things,—these three great lessons stand forth most prominently.

Gurnall observes, “The master here doth not only rule the scholar’s book for him; but writes him a copy with his own hand.”