

A Title or a Towel?

John 13

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A. W. Tozer: "A scared world needs a fearless church."

These are [scary times](#). Three hurricanes pummeled the Caribbean and US Gulf Coast last year, each causing tens of billions of dollars in damage. A massive earthquake last September killed 369 people in Mexico City. Two months later, 620 people were killed in an earthquake that struck the Iraq–Iran border.

The worst floods in a decade struck South Asia, killing more than 1,400 people. Wildfires ravaged California.¹

When crisis strikes, people often turn to the church for help. But that's happening less these days.

According to Barna, church attendance [declined](#) from 43 percent in 2004 to 36 percent in 2014.² The younger we are, the less likely we are to attend worship services. Pew Research Center reports that only 29 percent of [millennials](#) attend religious services even a few times a year.³

Now consider this. In *unChristian*, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons note that only 18 percent of millennials consider Christianity to be relevant to their lives. In four decades of vocational ministry, the single-greatest complaint against the church I have heard by non-members is that we are not relevant to their needs.

But every obstacle is an opportunity; every crisis contains a call.

The needs of our society are heartbreaking: hunger, poverty, child abuse, sex trafficking, and the list goes on. If we meet these needs with Jesus' love, we earn the right to share his word. If we show his grace in ours, a skeptical world will see our compassion and will be drawn to our Lord.

Jesus promised that it would be so.

Thank Jesus for washing your feet

John 13 finds us on Maundy Thursday, the night before Jesus' crucifixion. Here we read: "Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God" (v. 3). So "he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist" (v. 4).

Let's remember the setting for meals in Jesus' day, which was nothing like our customs (or most of the Last Supper depictions in art). Guests reclined on low couches, resting on the left elbow while using the right hand to eat and drink. Individual couches usually held

three people. John was on Jesus' right, for he was "reclining next to him" (John 13:23). The other favored position was at the host's left.

Apparently, Judas was at this place, for Jesus gave the bread directly to him (v. 26). Jesus placed some of the bitter herbs of the Passover meal between two pieces of unleavened bread, dipped it in the *charosheth* paste (made of apples, dates, and nuts), and gave it to him. Their entire conversation was apparently private, as the other disciples did not know its meaning (v. 28).

But before this exchange, Jesus "took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist." "Took off" translates *tithesin*, the same word used for Jesus' decision to "lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). "Outer clothing" refers to the external garments worn by Jewish men over their inner clothing.

This outer garment, usually called a "cloak," was made of a square-shaped piece of cloth with openings for the head and arms. It was typically made of animal skin or wool and was used by the poor as a blanket (Exodus 22:26; Deuteronomy 24:13).

The inner garment, usually called the "tunic," was made of wool or linen. It had openings for the head and arms and usually had long sleeves, though some had half sleeves. It was worn next to the skin, falling to the knees or ankles. Jesus referred to these two garments when he taught us, "If someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well" (Matthew 5:40).

"Towel" translates *linteum*, "linen cloth." The word is used in the New Testament only in this narrative. Jesus "wrapped" this long towel "around his waist"; the syntax indicates that he wrapped it all around himself with a long portion left to use.

Our text continues: "After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him" (v. 5).

Here we need to understand the cultural mores of Jesus' day. People wore open-toed sandals wherever they went. Such footwear provided no protection against the elements. The typical roads of Palestine were dirt in the dry season and mud in the rainy season. A person's feet would often be caked with dirt, animal dung, and other elements from their environment.

As a result, washing feet was regarded as the lowliest work possible. A host typically provided a water basin for his guests to use in washing their own feet, so that Jesus criticized Simon the Pharisee since "you did not give me any water for my feet" (Luke 7:44). A godly widow could be known for "washing the feet of the saints" (1 Timothy 5:10).

This task was delegated to Gentile slaves and women; no Jewish male could be made to perform this service, not even one enslaved to another. Abigail demonstrated her humility

before David in this way: "Here is your maidservant, ready to serve you and wash the feet of my master's servants" (1 Samuel 25:41).

So, Jesus "began to wash his disciples' feet," demonstrating the depth of his commitment to serve them. He could have washed their hands instead or anointed their heads with oil (Psalm 23:5). He could have prepared a meal for them (John 21:12–13) as an act of service. But he chose the lowliest act imaginable in their culture.

Jesus "poured water into a basin," an earthenware bowl (John 13:5). Then he went to the first disciple as he lay on the ground, his weight on his left elbow and his body stretched away from the table. He got to his knees and used the water in the basin to bathe the astonished man's grimy feet, "drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him."

The same Lord who washed his disciples' dirty feet is the Great Physician who touched leprosy bodies and unclean corpses. The same Savior who cared for demoniacs, tax collectors, and prostitutes. The same Savior who died on a cross for you and for me.

As you watch him wash feet, thank him for washing yours.

Pay your debt by serving your neighbor

In this way he crawled from disciple to disciple. Then "he came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?'" (v. 6). "You" and "my" are emphatic in the Greek syntax: "Lord, are *you* going to wash *my* feet?"

His shock spoke for them all; we might imagine Peter pulling his feet toward himself as he recoiled from Jesus' act of servitude.

"Jesus replied, 'You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand'" (v. 7). Peter interpreted Jesus' actions in cultural and physical terms; Jesus knew that later he would "understand" the spiritual significance of his service.

But Peter would not be dissuaded: "'No,' said Peter, 'you shall never wash my feet'" (v. 8a). "You shall never wash my feet" translates a "double negative" which could be rendered, "You shall by no means wash my feet, no, not ever."

Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no part with me'" (v. 8b). "Part" translates *meros*, meaning "to participate" or "share with."

Peter replied, "Then, Lord, not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" (v. 9). He protested earlier that Jesus was doing too much—now he complained that he was doing too little.

Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you" (v. 10). "Bath" translates *louo*, "to bathe the entire body" (cf. Acts 9:37). "Had a bath" is in the perfect tense, a completed action which is settled for all time.

Our Lord tried to explain to Peter and the others that his actions carried spiritual significance: if they had been washed by his atoning blood in salvation, they did not need such a bath again. Now comes the application: "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (vv. 14–15). "Should" translates a word meaning "to be indebted."

Jesus has washed our feet. Now we are to pay our debt to him by washing "one another's feet."

Conclusion

In many ways, the twenty-first century looks more like the first century than any in between.

In apostolic Christianity, the church possessed no buildings or recognized "clergy." In our day, church attendance is declining and clergy are increasingly marginalized.

In their day, there was no recognized definition of truth, as neo-Platonism competed with mystery cults, Stoicism, Epicureanism, Skepticism, Cynicism, emperor worship, and the gods of Mt. Olympus. In our day, absolute truth has become "your truth" and "my truth."

In their day, sexual immorality was epidemic; unwanted children were abandoned; suicide was common. In our day, the same is true.

And yet, by Acts 17:6, the first Christians had "turned their world upside down" (KJV) and soon became the largest spiritual movement in human history. How did they do it?

After Jesus finished washing his disciples' feet, he made an astounding promise: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). And they took him at his word.

These early Christians advanced God's kingdom by relevance. They showed a skeptical culture the love of God by their love. They rescued abandoned babies on trash heaps and adopted them as their own; they bought and freed slaves, befriended prostitutes, cared for lepers and plague victims, and prayed for their persecutors. When they fed hungry bodies, they fed hungry souls.

Now it's our turn.

When we stand before our Lord one day, he will not ask us about our titles, our accolades, our credentials and awards. But he will ask us about our towels.

How dirty is yours?

¹ Hilary Brueck, "Natural disasters set records around the world in 2017—these were the worst," *Business Insider*, December 24, 2017 (<http://www.businessinsider.com/worst-natural-disasters-hurricane-flood-wildfire-2017-12>, accessed 25 June 2018).

² Rick L. Stonestreet, "Church attendance is on the decline," *Daily Republic* (<https://www.dailyrepublic.com/all-dr-news/solano-news/local-features/local-lifestyle-columns/church-attendance-is-on-the-decline/>, accessed 25 June 2018).

³ "Attendance at religious services," *Pew Research Center* (<http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/attendance-at-religious-services/>, accessed 25 June 2018).