

Jesus Took the Towel

#0663

Study given by W.D. Frazee—January 30, 1959

We are told it would be well for us to spend some time each day meditating on the life of Christ, especially the closing scenes.

“Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that His hour was come that He should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end. And supper being ended, the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray Him; Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He was come from God, and went to God; He rises from supper, and laid aside His garments; and took a towel, and girded Himself. After that He pours water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith He was girded” John 13:1-5.

“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? Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them” John 13:12-17.

Why did Jesus take the towel when He might have had the throne? That is what we want to ponder. I am sure if we have never thought of this before, there is a lesson in it. But I believe that the greatest lessons will come to those who have thought of these things most often in the past.

As I was meditating and praying over these things it seemed to me the view of it came clearer and simpler and sweeter than ever before. If we can share together the view that Jesus had, and the experience He had, it will certainly be an upper room experience. I pray that we will all enter into it.

The King of glory, the One who all the universe had bowed to and will one day bow again, came to the last night He was to spend with His disciples. As He sat there with them in the upper room He took the cup. He girded Himself as a servant and served them. I ask again, Why did He do it?

Obviously there was a need. The disciples feet were soiled. There was an actual need, but it was a need that called for common work, menial work, humbling work.

The first obvious reason Jesus took the towel was that He might wash the disciples feet. In those days they didn't ride, they walked. They had open sandals. Their feet became dusty and soiled.

It was the customary thing for a servant to wash the feet of the guests who were at supper, but the disciples were poor. No servant had been provided. One of the disciples should have taken the towel and the basin of water and got busy, but none did.

Probably all of us could understand why they didn't do it, if we would be honest with ourselves. There are some things people run to get, but the job of washing feet is not one of them. And there are some other things like that.

There was no competition on this point. It was because there was competition on another subject. Luke says there was a strife among them as to which should be the greatest. Right there in the upper room they were carrying on that argument in the presence of Christ. With their eyes on that glittering goal of being first in the kingdom, they could not see the basin and the towel.

Jesus saw it. He saw in it the opportunity to meet a need. The disciples needed their feet washed. They also needed their hearts washed. In the towel He saw the tool that would accomplish both in one experience.

We would do well to see the simplicity of the method that He chose. He didn't say that if He had a whirlpool bath He might do something. He took the very simplest of equipment, and I want to deliberately emphasize that. There wasn't even a faucet. There was no bathroom. There was no plumbing.

A great many people imagine they could do a great deal if they had something. They imagine the equipment most people need to get busy for God is something they don't have, whatever that is. But Jesus took what He had. He took the towel and the basin and the water. That is all He had. As He saw it, that was all He needed.

He accomplished His purpose. He washed their feet and He washed their hearts. All but Judas. Judas left, you remember.

Looking into the faces and hearts of those men, Jesus could say when He had finished that work of love, "Ye are clean." Their feet were clean; their hearts were clean.

He did not stop there. After He had washed their feet, and had taken his garments and was sat down again, He said, Do you understand what has happened here tonight in this upper room? Oh friends, I pray that it may happen again tonight in this upper room.

That was the last night those disciples ever strove for supremacy. That was the last night they ever tried to climb to get the higher position. It never happened again in the lives of those men. Something happened that night in the upper room. I say again, would God that it could happen right here tonight.

Mark you, Jesus had not abdicated. He had not resigned. He had not given up one whit of His authority. He was no groveling worm. He had no false humility or mock humility. In divine dignity, conscious of the authority which was His, He took the towel.

Then He said, "If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you."

You say, Brother Frazee, this is hardly the time of the year when we take up this subject. This is not the time for quarterly meeting.

No it isn't. It is well along in the middle of the quarter. It has been some weeks since we had that service. It will be some weeks before we will have it again.

You say why study it then? This is the Scripture to study when we have the ordinance of humility.

Yes, it is the Scripture to study at that time. But should it be studied at any other time? What do you think? Was Jesus speaking here merely of a ceremonial ordinance?

Yes, He certainly was speaking of that. He was instituting a religious service, an ordinance. And from that day till this, even in spite of the great apostasy, Christians have met together from time to time and washed one another's feet as Jesus told them to do.

But my dear friends, that is a symbol. It is a symbol of the thing Jesus was talking about and acting out in a sweet, humble, loving service. He was doing things for other people that they needed done. He was doing them in a simple way, a tender, loving way. And mark the point, He was doing it with no thought of remuneration, no thought of position, and no thought of recognition.

That sounds something like medical missionary work, doesn't it? At least medical missionary work ought to sound something like that. Nearly a hundred years ago God gave this people the towel. He put in our hands not merely a symbol of service, but the instruments of service. And He told this people, By love serve others.

That is the great purpose of medical missionary work. That is the great objective of the program of ministry that God has committed to us that we may accomplish what Jesus accomplished that night in the upper room.

I have mentioned the simplicity of it. We are told that the more simple our methods in work for Christ the more we will accomplish (*Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 7, page 215). Speaking of the closing work:

“The workers will be surprised by the simple means that He will use to bring about and perfect His work of righteousness” *Testimonies to Ministers*, page 300.

Do you want to do something for Jesus? There is a basin on the shelf. There is a towel by it. There is something within your reach. There is something simple and humble that can be used to meet a need. A physical need, if you please. An actual, visible, tangible need. Of course, it will take work. It will take humble work. But if love is in the heart, love will find expression in taking the towel. That towel beckons us to loving service. Oh, that it may find from us the response of the Savior.

I think one of the most important things to see is what Jesus was after. His goal was to reach and change the heart of each one of His disciples. Without this all our work is a failure. The towel Jesus has committed to us isn't just to get people's feet clean. The fomentations that God bids us put on the bodies of weary men and women is not just to warm their skin or heal their diseases. Mark it, there is a spiritual ministry in all this to be accomplished.

It was very clear in the mind of Jesus. He knew what He was trying to do. In washing their feet He was seeking to change their hearts. Did He do it? Yes, He did it.

I want you to notice something very practical about all this. God intends that whenever you and I take the towel to minister to someone we shall have clearly in our minds two things. One is to help them physically and the other is to help them spiritually.

How did Jesus do it? As He sat there at the table and saw the condition they were in, the words that He was about to say never came from His lips. Infinite wisdom was stopped by the selfishness of that group. Infinite love could find nothing further to say.

Do you ever find a situation where your words seem weak and powerless and ineffective? Jesus did. What did He do? He didn't keep on talking, neither did He withdraw in defeat. He took the towel and washed their feet. He did the simple, humble thing to serve them, and love broke their hearts. I want you to notice that as He began to actually do something for them, His lips were opened again. I was glad to find this statement:

“Jesus, by His example, gave His disciples a lesson of humility. Having girded Himself like a servant, He washed the feet of His disciples, conversing with them

the while in solemn tenderness. He, the spotless Son of God, stooped to wash the feet of His followers as one of the last tokens of His love for them" *Spirit of Prophecy*, Vol. 3, page 84.

His words were stopped as He sat at the table. There was nothing more He could say. But when He got up and put aside His outer garments, and took the towel and the basin and began, first with Judas and on around to Peter, soft, tender words came from His lips. His words were in harmony with His actions. They were blended into a beautiful duet, and the keynote was love.

What Jesus did was practical. Think of Jesus with the towel and the basin and the water in that upper room as He moves from one to another of His patients, and gives them their treatment and changes their hearts.

"As the medical missionary works intelligently to relieve suffering and save life, hearts are softened. Those who are helped are filled with gratitude. As the medical missionary works upon the body, God works upon the heart" *Ibid*.

Oh brother, do you want God to work on some heart? Would you take the towel and work upon the body while the Holy Spirit works upon the heart?

"The comforting words that are spoken are a soothing balm, bringing assurance and trust. Often the skillful operator will have an opportunity to tell of the work Christ did while He was upon this earth. Tell the suffering one the story of God's love" *Evangelism*, page 517.

I think that is wonderful. What are we after as we take the towel? We are after the hearts of men and women. That is what Jesus was after. He want after those hearts, and He got them. He got them with the towel and with the sweet loving words that came from His lips as He ministered to them.

I repeat. Unless that spiritual objective is clear and strong in our hearts, we are either simply doing humanitarian service, or we are doing some drudgery we get paid for. God forbid that we should sink to either level.

If medical missionary work is drudgery it is not medical missionary work. If medical missionary work is just humanitarian service it is not medical missionary work. Medical missionary work is serving others in love, for love's sake, seeking to win them to Christ and to eternal glory.

We are warned to keep these practical, mechanical things on such a high spiritual level that they result in the changing of the hearts of men and women. We are warned that unless we do that we had just as well close it up. Perhaps I ought to read something to get the import of it:

“There is danger in the establishment of restaurants of losing sight of the work that most needs to be done. There is danger of the workers losing sight of the work of soul saving as they carry forward the business part of the enterprise. There is danger that the business part of the work will be allowed to crowd out the spiritual work”
Medical Ministry, page 306.

This is talking about the restaurant work, but it applies to every other phase of medical missionary work. We get so efficient with our man-made ideas. We set some people to work with the towel, and we set other people to work with the words of Scripture, the words of love, and somehow we accomplish the Devil's purpose in separating that which God intended should be joined together. I quote the words of Scripture, “What God hath joined together let not man put asunder.”

God has joined the medical and the missionary work, the health work and the gospel ministry, together in union that is not to be dissolved. And it is because these lines of work are united that we may expect to gather the most precious fruit for the Lord.

Jesus got eleven out of twelve of the hearts He worked for that night. Oh, let's pray that God will help us to get and keep this vision of what the purpose of the towel is. Jesus didn't degrade Himself in what He did. He exalted the towel, and He has committed that towel to us.

Don't misunderstand me. I am not talking merely of hydrotherapy tonight, although I am talking about hydrotherapy. I am not just talking about nursing, although definitely I am talking about nursing. There are other towels besides bath towels and hydro towels.

There is one towel I have had years of experience in using. It is the kitchen towel, the dish towel. I had no sisters when I was growing up, and I was early given the opportunity of serving as an apprentice in the use of the dish towel. I thank the Lord for it.

Do you love the towel? Men today are spending thousands upon thousands of dollars in an endeavor to take the towel away from us, domestically and medically, and every other way.

Why? After outlining the wonderful, natural remedies that God has given us, the Lord's messenger says that these remedies are going out of date because their skillful use requires work that people do not appreciate.

Do you appreciate that kind of work? Do you see in the towel the opportunity to serve, and therefore heaven's invitation to join with Christ in the fellowship of ministry?

We like to say that Jesus spend more time healing than He did preaching. That is true, but He spend more time with the hammer than He did with medical

missionary work. He had a hammer and a saw in His hand many more years than He dealt with the healing of the sick.

In fact, some people had so little comprehension of the reason He was here in the world that when they were trying to refute His teachings, they simply referred to the fact that He was a carpenter. They put it in question form, contemptuously, "Is not this the carpenter?"

Yes, Jesus is the carpenter. He spent years with the hammer and saw and chisel and plane for the same reason He took the towel in the upper room. There are other tools that may be just as near to you as that towel was to Jesus that night. It may not be a towel, but a trowel that is calling you. It may be a shovel that is inviting you to ministry. Would you run from it, or would you reach out to take it?

Anyone can do that. Well, you are not anyone, are you? Oh, no, You are someone, and that is our great trouble. Anyone can take a towel and wash feet, but no one did it that night. So, the Lord of glory did it.

There is another tool I have served an apprenticeship with. It is a broom. I told you I didn't have any sisters. I had the opportunity to learn to sweep the floor when I was six and seven. My mother was a church school teacher. She was busy. It was my job in my pre-teen years to sweep and mop the whole house on Friday.

Do not think I am boasting. God knows I have a selfish human heart the same as anyone else, but the more I study these things the more I love these simple instruments of service. And I can tell you honestly from my heart (I give all the glory to God) I enjoy taking a broom and sweeping a floor and getting it clean. I am still doing it. I enjoy taking a shovel like I did yesterday to fix the road, and I expect to use it again.

Some of these tools I do not know how to use. I don't know much about brick masonry. I have had a trowel in my hand and have laid a few concrete blocks, but most of the complicated things that takes skilled workmen I don't know how to do. I couldn't use a lathe. I couldn't run a bulldozer.

But I know how to use a shovel and a broom, and I know how to use a hoe. I thank God for all the experts that can do these technical things we need to have done, even to taking out an appendix, or working on the plumbing or electrical system. We need experts to do those things. But the more I look at this thing, the more interested I am in helping young people and older people to appreciate the wonderful opportunity of becoming lovingly proficient and proficiently loving in using the broom and the hoe and the dish towel. Something wonderful is going to happen as soon as you and I fully learn that lesson and demonstrate it.

I will tell you a little story, and I learned it just a short time ago.

In September, 1950, Wayne Waterhouse was returning from Europe with some students on a steamship. Quite a number of students had been over to Europe that summer. Some were traveling, and some were taking work at various

universities. The whole steamship was filled with teachers and students. They were, of course, discussing various things together.

Among them was a Japanese scholar who was professor of oriental philosophy at Columbia University here in the United States. He had been to Oxford University in England for the summer studying western philosophies. In the course of the discussion on the steamship these students were talking to this Japanese professor, and as they were discussing philosophies they asked him what his was.

He said that in order to be worth something, a religion or a philosophy must have the light of life.

They asked what the light of life was.

He said, "The light of life has three L's—Love, Law, and Labor."

This is the Japanese professor who has the chair of oriental philosophy at Columbia University who is talking. He is saying that religion or philosophy must have love, law, and labor, and that they must be combined or they are worthless.

Then he went on to show why any one of these three alone would be worthless. Love without law is mere sentiment, and love without labor is only a dream. Law without love is tyranny, and law without labor is only a scrap of paper. Labor without love is drudgery, and labor without law is confusion.

Then this Japanese professor said, "I have been looking for a religion which combines all three of these, and when I find it, that is what my religion will be."

Dear friends, could you show him that combination? Notice my question is, could you show him? I don't mean tell him. Could you show him the light of life in which love and law and labor are all blinded in one experience?

As I heard that story I thought of some other wise men from the East who nineteen hundred years ago followed a light that led them to a stable. They did not shrink back and say, Oh, we are looking for a mansion, a palace, or at least a modern home where everything looks nice and efficient and up to date. So this can't be it. No. They knelt down, and recognizing the light of life they worshipped and adored. Then they opened their caskets and gifts came out.

Let me tell you what is going to happen down here in these closing hours. Some wise men are coming again when the star shines. Some wise men today are looking for the light of life. To us it is written:

"Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising" Isaiah 60:1-3.

What do you see when you read that? The wise men found it at Bethlehem in a stable. Today the wisest men of earth are yet to find in some humble home, in some little institution, in some individuals who devote their lives to the service of the towel that glory which the wise men found at Bethlehem where love and law and labor are blended. Could they find it in your home? Could they find it in your life? Ah, may God make it so for every one of us.

As I was thinking about this, I thought about three kinds of people in this world:

One class is lazy, too lazy to exert themselves to do much. They just move along and get by the least way they can. I hope none of us belong to that class.

Then there is the class of ambitious folks who are willing to work hard for money or recognition. If they can get money, they will work their fingernails off. They may do it for fame or position or recognition. If they can get some kind of notice or praise they will work and work hard. And they despise these lazy folks who have no get up and go.

The third class is just as industrious as the second class, and just as not caring what happens to them as the first class. That is a rare combination. The unconverted heart cannot understand them. The multitudes didn't understand Jesus. They thought that if a person had the ability He claimed He had then He ought to be getting somewhere faster.

Listen. The wise men recognized Him in the stall at Bethlehem, but if they had come back 33 years later and found Him with a towel girded about Him washing His disciples feet, I wonder if any of them might have said, Well, is that all the further you have gotten in 33 years?

No, I don't think they would have. But there were many who had that attitude. There are people who are willing to take the broom for awhile, if they can look forward to getting past that. They are willing to use the towel in their freshmen year, but when they get to be seniors they ought to be beyond such humble, menial service as that. And certainly when they graduate nobody would expect them to take it. They are supervisors now, you understand. And that is what is killing the medical missionary work.

I thank God that I know some medical missionary workers who could go out and get either money or fame and recognition from this world, but they have caught the vision of the towel. I thank God there are men and women in this room who have deliberately turned their back on the race for position or remuneration. They have deliberately set themselves to be busy about one thing—serving others for love's sake in order to win the hearts of men for Christ.

I repeat. When you and I catch that vision and that spirit, the light that glowed on the hills of Bethlehem will fill this earth with glory, and the loud cry will be upon us.

“The last rays of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is a revelation of His character of love” *Christ’s Object Lessons*, page 415.

We are told it is practical ministry that will reveal that love. That is why everyone today is called to be a medical missionary.

Our heavenly Father, give us the eyes that discern in a stable the light of the universe tabernacling with men. Give us hearts that can see in a towel and a basin the tools that will accomplish the miracle of the ages—the changing of human hearts by loving ministry to the body. Teach us to see in these experiences not the transition labors of students as they strive for something beyond. Rather teach us to see in these tools the equipment with which to fill our life’s work and accomplish our life’s objective.

Teach us, like Jesus, to come not to be ministered unto, but to minister and give our lives for others. In Jesus’ sweet and precious name. Amen.

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W.D. Frazee Sermons
PO Box 102, Wildwood, GA 30757
1-800-WDF-1840 / 706-820-9755
www.WDFsermons.org
support@WDFsermons.org