

Washing – Inward and Outward

The new Testament portion of our daily readings brings us to consider the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, in relation to washing:

“... when they saw some of his disciples eat bread with defiled, that is to say, with unwashen, hands, they found fault. For the Pharisees and all the Jews, except they washed their hands oft, eat not, holding the tradition of the elders. And when they come from the market, except they wash, they eat not” (Mrk. 7:2-4).

The problem with the Pharisees was not so much that they washed their hands before eating for reasons of hygiene: it was to provide an outward shew of righteousness. They even had a tradition of a particular method of washing, outwardly, before the eyes of men, to attract to themselves the praise of men. By contrast, as we shall presently consider, believers in Christ commit themselves to an *inward* washing, in the hidden man of the heart, not for an outward show.

The first reference to *washing* in Scripture involves the provision of water for the washing of the feet, as a token of humility and hospitality. So Abraham extended hospitality to his three heavenly visitors:

“he lift up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him: and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself towards the ground, And said, My Lord, if now I have found favour in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant: let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and **wash your feet**, and rest yourselves under the tree: and I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your hearts ...” (Gen. 18:2-5).

Similarly, Lot provided for the same visitors when they came to him:

“... he said, Behold now, my lords, turn in, I pray you, into your servant’s house, and tarry all night, and **wash your feet**, and ye shall rise up early and go on your ways” (Gen. 19:2).

Providing water for foot-washing then, seems to have been a standard extension of hospitality towards visitors in the Holy Land. The practical need can be seen, the feet being in contact with the dusty ground would need to be washed more regularly than the rest of the body. The provision of water for that purpose would have been welcomed and demonstrated humility on the part of the host.

However, Abigail, the wife of Nabal the fool, took things a stage further. Not only would she provide water, she would do the actual washing herself: “... she arose, and bowed herself on her face to the earth, and said, Behold, let thine handmaid be a servant **to wash the feet** of the servants of my lord” (1 Sam. 25:41). Here was true humility expressed in action: to wash the feet of David’s servants would be to minister to their needs and would demonstrate a humble spirit, being even willing to do such a menial task. Accordingly, the Apostle spoke of the virtues of those who had the spirit of Abigail: “well reported of for good works; if she have brought up children, if she have lodged strangers, **if she have washed the saint’s feet**, if she have relieved the afflicted, if she have diligently followed every good work” (1 Tim. 5:10).

Then, we come to consider the example of Messiah himself: John chapter 13 records how our Lord washed the feet of his disciple as an example of service: “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” (Jno. 13 see verses 3-15).

This is the true spirit of servitude and humility: washing the dust off the feet of those that had travelled with him as they went out preaching the Gospel message. Interestingly Roman chapter 10 (which cites Isa. 52:7) speaks of the preaching of the Gospel thus: "... how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? As it is written, ***How beautiful are the feet*** of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!" (Rom. 10:14-15). The feet are not ordinarily thought of as being objects of beauty: but spiritually they can be. There are no feet so beautiful as those washed by Messiah himself. In this foot-washing service which took place at the same occasion as the institution of the Breaking of Bread, we see Christ humbling himself as a servant and preparing his disciples to go out to being "glad tidings of good things" with "beautiful feet," being washed into the ministry as being Apostles serving each other, as well as carrying out the example of their Lord and Master.

Exodus chapter 29 describes the inauguration of the priests, under the auspices of Moses:

"Aaron and his sons thou shalt bring unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, and shalt wash them with water" (Exod. 29:4).

Just as Moses washed Aaron and his sons to prepare them for their ministry, even so Christ washed his disciples to commence their ministry. But our Master himself required a 'washing' at the commencement of his own ministry, a duty which was fulfilled by John the Baptizer:

"Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him. But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him. Then Jesus, when he was baptised, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: and a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mat. 3:13-17).

In these events, we behold the Divine Approval of Yahweh's Son, and an occasion which marked the commencement of Christ's own ministry. There are those who stumble over why the Messiah had to be baptised: he had no sins to be forgiving, and he had no moral defilement to be washed away. Why then, was it necessary for him to be washed in the waters of baptism? The answer lies when we consider what these things represent in Scripture. Messiah demonstrated the greatest form of *agape* love when he laid down his life for his friends. But in order for him to save others, it was necessary for him to save himself. Like the Ark of Noah, which had to preserve itself in order to preserve its occupants, so Christ needed to save himself as the means by which he could bring salvation to others. Baptism in Scripture signifies a death to the things of the flesh, and is the symbolic means by which men and women associate themselves with the death and resurrection of their Redeemer (see Romans chapter 6). Through Baptism, we become constitutionally in Him, and so become heirs of the promises made to him, as being the greater seed of Abraham. Jesus' mortal ministry ended with a literal sacrificial death, but in a beautiful symmetry, it also began with a symbolic death: that of Baptism. In his Baptism, Christ enacted his own death and subsequent resurrection, the means by which he, and a whole multitude of others would be delivered from under the dominion of death (Rom 6:9). He foreshadowed how he would be cleansed from the defilement of human nature, to become glorious, immortal and pure in every conceivable sense. Even so, the apostle describes how we become partakers with that death, in language which reminds us of Moses' washing of the priests:

"... and having a high priest over the house of God; let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, ***and our bodies washed with pure water***" (Heb. 10:22).

2 Samuel 11 recounts for our learning the episode of David's sin with Bath-Sheba, as he beheld her beauty when she was washing her body:

“It came to pass in an eventide, that David arose from off his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house: and from the roof, he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon ... and David sent messengers, and took her; and she came in unto him, and he lay with her ...” (2 Sam. 11:1, 4).

So, the record presents to us the way in which king David committed adultery, and then tried to cover up what he had done, by having Uriah (Bathsheba's husband) put on the front line to be killed by the sword of the Philistines. He was therefore guilty of both adultery and murder: two sins ordinarily punishable by death. But though he were a sinner, David was no hypocrite: once his sin was set before him by Nathan the Prophet, he recognised his guilt: “David said unto Nathan, ***I have sinned*** against Yahweh” (2 Sam. 12:13). What is particularly relevant to our present considerations, is David's prayer to Yahweh on this occasion, recorded as Psalm 51:

“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies, ***blot out*** my transgressions. ***Wash me*** thoroughly from mine iniquity, and ***cleanse me*** from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me” (Psa. 51:1-3).

In acknowledging his sin, David threw himself upon the mercy of Yahweh, and sought forgiveness. The One who had begun this episode of sin by exercising the lust of the eyes and the lust of the flesh, recognised his own need for a spiritual cleansing. Whereas he began by looking upon a woman washing herself, he ended the affair with a prayer that he might be washed from his iniquity, that the stain upon his good character would be removed. Indeed, the forgiveness of David is held up by the Apostle as being an example for us, as a case when the ungodly was justified: “even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, Saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin” (Rom. 4:6-7).

The point about David's forgiveness however, was that it was not an outward washing, but an internal cleansing: “Behold, thou desirest truth ***in the inward parts*** ...” (Psa. 51:6). The Pharisees delighted in a public display of washing, but David recognised that what is needed is an internal cleansing from sin. This actually comes out from the occasion when David was selected from among his brethren to become the king over Israel. All his brethren were made to pass before Samuel, and each were rejected, despite their physical prowess. “But Yahweh said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for Yahweh seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but Yahweh looketh ***on the heart***” (1 Sam. 16:7). King David therefore, was chosen by God upon the basis of having a good heart which remained with him, despite his personal shortcomings in the case of Bath-Sheba and her husband.

Turning to our New Testament reading for the day, we find that the Pharisees were preoccupied with the external ritual, having no regard for the spiritual principle. They asked the Master, “why walk not thy disciples according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashen hands? (Mrk 7:5). His reply was a devastating blow to their doctrinal edifice:

“he answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as ***the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do.*** And he said unto them, Full well ye reject

the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition ..." (Mrk. 7 see verses 1-9. see also Isa. 29:23).

Washing, for them, was an external ritual only: it was not the cleansing of the heart, and an answer of a good conscience before God. As the Master is recorded as having said elsewhere: "within they are full of extortion and excess" (Mat. 23:25), and again, "ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness" (Mat. 23:27).

The generation of vipers who railed against Messiah was anticipated by Solomon, a later son of David and Bathsheba: "there is a generation that is pure in their own eyes, and *yet is not washed* from their filthiness" (Prov. 30:12 see context also). The leaders of Messiah's day match this description absolutely, they remained in their sins, and wallowed in the defilement thereof, like the swine wallowing in the mire.

There is a washing of the hands that is taught in Scripture, but in a spiritual sense. Psalm 26:6 reads: "I have hated the congregation of evildoers; and will not sit with the wicked. I will *wash mine hands in innocency*: so will I compass thine altar, O Yahweh" (Psa. 26:6). The hands are the means by which things are done, and the figure is used in that way, in the words of Scripture. Washing the hands represented the doing of pure things, and removing away those things that defile. But Pilate used this ritual in a purely external show:

"When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and *washed his hands* before the multitude, saying, *I am innocent* of the blood of this just person: see ye to it ..." (Mat. 27:24).

Pilate seems to have assumed that by utilising this Jewish tradition, he could be absolved from the guilt of what he was about to do. But the external washing accomplishes nothing, unless it is matched with a pure heart and undefiled conscience.

Many of these principles are brought together in Psalm 24, which also speaks of the purity of a washed saint: "Who shall ascend into the hill of Yahweh? Or who can stand in his holy place? *He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart*; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully. He shall receive the blessing from Yahweh, and righteousness from the God of his salvation" (Psa. 24:4-5). To have clean hands and a pure heart are both required by Yahweh for an acceptable approach into His Presence. We need to consider Messiah in this context. He is ultimately the only one who can truly claim to have purity of hands and heart. Yet, through faith in his Name, and Power to save, we can become justified from our sins, and sanctified before our God. We, to use the comparison of the Apocalypse, wash our garments in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 7:14). At a natural level, blood produces a stain that is difficult to remove. But that is the natural level: the spiritual principle is that we become cleansed through faith (Eph. 5:26) in the Word and Testimony concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the influence of the Word Made Flesh, not H₂O that cleanses our hearts and thoughts. We must seek to focus our attention upon the things of the spirit, so that when Christ comes to be glorified in his brethren, it might be granted to us, to wear undefiled garments, sanctified by Messiah himself.

Christopher Maddocks