

THE DRAMA OF A TOWEL

"Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He was come from God, and went to God; He riseth from supper, and laid aside His garments; and took a towel, and girded Himself. After that He poureth water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith He was girded."
John 13:3-5.

When one is leaving home he usually wants to assemble his best friends and spend a little time with them. So, when the time arrived that Jesus must leave His disciples, He chose to have them with Him in an upper room for a period of fellowship and a last meal together.

On their way to that upper room the disciples engaged in an acrimonious dispute as to "which of them should be accounted the greatest," and therefore entitled to the precedence in the kingdom that was to be established. Evidently the contention had been keen and bitter and their feelings were ruffled by the strife. In a jealous and contentious spirit, and full of anger and resentment, they entered the upper room and seated themselves like a group of sulky schoolboys. It must have been unspeakably painful to Jesus to note how their self-esteem hindered the growth of the spirit which He had sought to promote. While Christ was thinking of a cross, they were thinking of a crown. While His mind was fixed upon unselfish abnegation, their minds were centered upon selfish glorification.

It was a custom among the Jews that when guests were assembling for a feast, the servant of the household removed their sandals and washed their feet in a basin of cold water. No Jew would have dreamed of coming in at nightfall and reclining for the evening meal without first having washed away the dirt which had gathered on his feet during the day. Of course, such a procedure was practically necessary in a country where the wayfarers, instead of wearing shoes, wore only thin sandals on their feet. A considerable part of the foot was thus left exposed, as is the case with many of our modern American women, and through walking necessarily became heated and soiled with the fine dust of the roads. Much discomfort was thus produced, and the first duty of a host was to provide for its removal. It was customary for this duty to be reserved for and performed by the meanest of the household slaves and it was attended to as soon as the guests were received.

One imagines that, under ordinary circumstances, the disciples performed this humble duty in turns since they were too poor to have a slave to do all the menial services for them. During all the time that they had associated with each other, it seems very probable that the twelve had taken it in turn to render this service for each other and for their Master. If the usual ablution, therefore, was to be made, the disciples must wait upon each other.

But on this particular evening not one of them volunteered to do it. The basin, the water and the towel had been provided for their use, as a matter of course, but no one pretended to see them. Since there had been a sharp contention among them as to which of them should be accounted the greatest and each had asserted his own claim to superiority, no one of them would condescend to wash the feet of the rest. If any one of them had been willing to perform this menial service, it would have been tantamount to saying that he was the servant of all, and none of them was willing to do that. Doubtless, each one thought that the performance of such a service would preclude his ever being exalted to first place in the kingdom. They stood on their dignity -- a very poor foundation -- because each thought that a principle was at stake and he could not afford to compromise himself.

After waiting to see what they would do and when it became apparent that they would not do anything, suddenly and yet quietly Jesus arose from the table, picked up a towel and tied it about His waist, after the manner of a servant. Then He took an empty basin,

filled it with water and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel wherewith He was girded. It was an exceedingly commonplace thing to do. It was the task of a servant, the duty of a menial. None of the twelve had been in the mood to render this necessary service to his fellows, so Jesus Christ did it, doubtless beginning with John and ending with Judas.

His affection was prompted by their conduct in shrinking from the performance of their duty. What they refused to do for each other, the Lord Jesus did for each of them. Surely they could not have been rebuked more severely than by seeing their Lord and Master do what they thought themselves above doing. In order to teach them the correct principle of service, Jesus took a towel. He might have taken a sword, a scepter, a crown, a creed, or anything else, but He took a towel and became a servant.

Before the disciples could recover from their astonishment, the Lord Jesus had completed the task. What a rebuke it must have been as they watched Him render this lowly service! They were instantly and greatly humiliated by the fact that while they were aspiring to a throne, He was willing to take a towel. During His earthly ministry Jesus is said to have taken two things, namely, a towel and a cross; a towel for service and a cross for sacrifice. He took a towel and performed the lowliest service that one could render for another. In so doing He seized the opportunity to teach His disciples, as well as all of His later followers, a never-to-be-forgotten lesson. And what a lesson it was!

Christ had girded Himself for the purpose of teaching the twelve a lesson in service. They were clinging to the idea that greatness meant domination. They had not been able to get away from the world's error that position and power involved "lording it over" others. Time and again Christ had refuted that idea, but they persisted in holding it and expressing it. Finally, by this simple incident, He engraved on their souls the truth that primacy means preeminence in service, and can mean nothing else. By His example He taught that life is service. He admonished them to live lives of service and make life as easy as possible for others. It was as if He had said, "The only lordship that I have to offer comes through service, the only glory is that of sacrifice, and the only leadership is that of love. Your task in the world is not merely to do great things but to do even the small things well, to use your talent in the doing of humble deeds."

After the disciples had clamored for the first place, and each had been anxious to get ahead of the others, Jesus had girded Himself with a towel and washed their feet, thereby showing them and us the glory that plays about hands devoted to humble service. Remember, too, that those hands were soon to be pierced for the redemption of the world. But even then, He was not ashamed in the least for them to be seen washing the feet of weary pilgrims. In fact, they were glorified by this deed of commonplace kindness.

When Jesus took the towel and went from one disciple to another, He thereby showed the twelve the road their feet must travel if they would be truly great. Jesus did not discourage their ambition to become great. In fact, not long before He had encouraged it by saying, "Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your servant; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your minister." Do you have a desire to be great? If so, you have a laudable ambition. Nearly every young person has such a desire, but so many have a wrong conception of greatness. The error of the twelve, that greatness is dominance, is a popular error to this day. Jesus certainly challenged this error. He taught His disciples that they had lost their way and were on the wrong track. He made it plain to them that the way to greatness is not how many people one can command, but how many one can serve. Our Lord said many startling things, but He never said anything more startling than when He challenged the world's view of greatness. And He never did anything more startling than when He took a towel and washed the dusty feet of His disciples. Do you see anything menial in that? No, it was majestic. It was the way to greatness.

His unusual service was rendered when the need of the hour was action instead of words, example instead of precept, and deeds instead of creeds. When the disciples sorely needed to see a sermon, the Lord Jesus put one on the stage of action and dramatized it right before their eyes. And He did it in a way which they never forgot. They might have forgotten what He said, but it was impossible for them to forget what He did. In the drama of a towel He expressed a love which no force could conquer and acted a truth which has survived the ages. After all, action is the unforgettable way of saying a thing. One simply immortalizes his message when he translates it into deeds.

Christ simply wanted to teach His disciples the value and importance of humility. He was not commanding the observance of a ceremony, but rather the adoption of the law of self-denying service. In thus calling His own to forsake self-seeking, He did something for them and He did something to them. And by His example He accomplished more in a few minutes than He would have accomplished in many hours of urging them to perform their duties to each other. When they beheld His condescension, they understood that it was not lowering their dignity to be humble and to be willing to serve one another.

Christ's unusual deed of humility was exceedingly valuable in that it gave visible embodiment to the spirit which governed all His life. It is that spirit which He commends to us and would have us to make dominant in our lives, too. To follow Christ means to live a life of Christian service and helpfulness. If you cannot help others along life's dusty way, it is because you are not high enough to stoop or not good enough to serve. The real test of dignity and greatness is the ability to stoop and serve. The world soon forgets its masters who wield its weapons of conquest, but it never forgets its servants. And in the end, it recognizes that only those who stoop to serve are truly great. Genuine Christian service is the badge of greatness and life's shining glory. Be a king with a towel! Be a queen with a towel!