

Transformed Characters

The Pre-Transformed Peter – “You Shall Never Wash My Feet!”

John 13:1-17

Who is Peter?

Peter was a rugged and coarse Galilean fisherman before Jesus met him. And according to the Jewish historian Josephus, Galileans were quick-tempered, impulsive, emotional, easily roused by an adventure and loyal to the end. This temperament may be one of the contributing reasons to Peter’s and his brother Andrew’s immediate response to Jesus when the Lord said to them, “Follow Me” (Mark 1:18). Without hesitation they left their lucrative fishing business based in Capernaum and followed Jesus. No doubt Jesus’ personality and preaching was very compelling but Peter’s adventurous abandon also had a hand in his response.

Soon after following Jesus Peter became the leader and spokesperson for the disciples. His boldness led him to ask questions nobody else would ask (Matt 15:15; 18:21; 19:27). He also acted as Jesus’ PR man to those on the outside (Matt 17:24) and when Jesus and His disciples were in Capernaum Peter’s home became Jesus’ ministry headquarters (Mark 1:29-32). Though loyal, Peter was impulsive. When Jesus’ revelation of His impending death and resurrection did not fit with his idea of how the Messiah’s career should turn out, Peter argued with Jesus and rebuked Him. This of course earned him a rebuke from the Lord instead. Jesus’ words to Peter perhaps gives us a glimpse to the state of Peter’s mind before his transformation – it was a mind set not on God’s interests but man’s (Matt 16:23). How about us, where is our mind set on?

Now in another incident where Peter’s pre-transformed self comes to the forefront, we are in the scene of the Upper Room.

The Scene in the Upper Room

The opening words of John in this chapter informs us that the event taking place in the Upper Room was just “before the Feast of the Passover.” It was a Thursday evening (15 Nisan, according to the Jewish calendar) and the supper was being served. Satan had already “put it into the heart of Judas” to betray Jesus. Well aware of this and what was to take place, Jesus rose from the supper and did something that was completely shocking to His disciples and contrary to what is expected when dealing with one’s enemies. This was because Jesus knew who He was, where He came from, what He had and where He was going. He was in full control of the situation.

Jesus took off His outer garments and wrapped a towel around His waist. He adopted the stance of a menial, even non-Jewish, slave, a position despised by both Jews and Gentiles. Jesus then “poured water into a basin” and did the unthinkable, He “began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel wrapped around Him.” For although there are occasional exceptions featuring people other than non-Jewish slaves washing the feet of others but there are no records in Jewish or Greco-Roman sources of a superior washing the feet of an inferior. Jesus was demonstrating to His disciples what humility means and how much He loves them.

Warren Wiersbe remarks,

"Jesus was sovereign, yet He took the place of a servant. He had all things in His hands, yet He picked up a towel. He was Lord and master, yet He served His followers. It has well been said humility is not thinking meanly of yourself; it is simply not thinking of yourself at all. True humility grows out of our relationship with the Father. If our desire is to know and do the Father's will so that we might glorify His name, then we will experience the joy of following Christ's example and serving others."

As Peter watched his teacher and Lord wash the disciples' feet one by one, he became more and more disturbed and could not understand what He was doing. This definitely did not square with his understanding of who the Messiah is and what He should be doing. So when it came to his turn, Peter questioned Jesus' intention, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" And even after Jesus assured him that he would understand later what is going on, Peter flatly refused and impulsively exclaimed, "You shall never wash my feet." Instead of being angry with Peter's outburst, like a patient father trying to persuade a pouting child to do something, Jesus laid out the consequence if Peter did not allow Him to wash his feet – Peter will have no share, have no part with Him. On hearing this Peter went the opposite direction, he asked for a complete bath. This was Peter's temperament expressing itself in over-eagerness and the inclination for exaggeration. Are we sometimes like the pre-transformed Peter when we refuse to do what God asks of us because it does not conform to our thinking or understanding?

Jesus then explained that Peter and the disciples (except Judas Iscariot) were already bathed and are clean. The only part that needs to be washed is the feet because this is the part that gets defiled as one walks. All who believe and follow Jesus are cleansed by His once-for-all atoning work. But as we walk in this world we can easily become defiled by sins which hinder our communion with our Lord. However, we do not need to be bathed all over again; we simply need to have that sin or defilement cleansed away. God promises to cleanse us when we confess our sins to Him (1 John 1:9). The foot washing serves as a symbolic act of total purification.

Wiersbe points out that Peter had a difficult time accepting Jesus' ministry to him because Peter was not yet ready to minister to the other disciples. There was a lot of pride in Peter. Not the boastful kind but the type that makes him think of himself more highly than he is. Humility and grace are needed to serve others but it also takes humility and grace to be served by others. The pre-transformed Peter has yet to come to the point where his spirit was totally submissive. Do we have a fully submissive spirit where we humble ourselves before God and man?

The Object Lesson

Jesus, upon returning to His seat, drives home the lesson that He intended to teach His disciples by washing their feet. If He, being Lord and Teacher was willing to wash His disciples' feet, His followers should do the same for one another. Jesus gave them a lesson in humble service, an example of true Christian ministry. This is indeed an area where we can expect God to do a transforming work in us. We should constantly reflect on this by asking, "Are we following in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus in serving others?"

As an emphasis and caution on what to expect as His disciples and emissaries, Jesus warned them that, "a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater

than the one who sent them." If Jesus, as Master and the One who sends them out, humbled Himself to be a servant, the same is expected of His disciples. But knowledge of this truth is not good enough. The blessing comes only if one puts this truth into practice. Transformation will indeed take place as the Holy Spirit helps us do that.

Source:

Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).

Charles Swindol, *Insights on James, 1 and 2 Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).

Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Transformed* (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Pub, 1986).

Daily Bible Study, *John 13:1-17: The Son as a Slave* (<https://www.ivpress.com/bible/study.php?study=258>, accessed 19 Feb 2016).

Questions for Cell Discussion

Question 1

Read the passage in John 13:1-17. From verses 1 to 3.

What can you observe about what Jesus knows about Himself (vv. 1-3)? In light of that knowledge, what is remarkable about what Jesus did next (vv. 4-5)?

Question 2

Foot washing was normally done by servants or slaves. Why do you think that Jesus washed His disciples' feet instead of simply talking to them about love?

From verses 6 to 8, would you interpret that Peter was simply being humble when he refused to allow Jesus to serve him (vv. 6-8)? Explain.

Question 3

Based on Jesus' words in verse 17, how would you describe the relationship between knowledge, action and blessing in the Christian life?

Question 4

Applying this passage to our Christian life, what has this episode revealed to you about your attitude towards serving? Do you think that this may be an area you will need to pray for God to do a transforming work?

In what specific ways can you model the humility of Jesus towards those with whom you live or work?

