

## **“A Dirty Job Someone Has to Do”**

John 13:1-17

*Series: Grace Week 4. The Grace to Forgive*

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If you were on Facebook anytime since Holy Week you may have seen one of our many videos about the Grace sermon series. In one episode I attempt to clean up after Easter only to the vacuum cleaner take off and a stack of chairs take me down. In the final scene I plunge a toilet and say, “Next time I have to read the fine print in my contract.” That very Sunday – I am not making this up – someone came to me after the morning services and said, “Uh Doug, the toilet overflowed in the Men’s room.”

Ministry – it’s a dirty job but someone has to do it.

Jesus, the God of the Universe, stooped down low to be born in a manger, live among us, care for the lost, the loser, the lonely, die on a cross and be buried in a borrowed tomb. It was a dirty job but someone had to do it. Thank God, Jesus did. That’s Grace. So far in this series, Grace means God corrects our misbehaving hearts by giving us a new heart – the heart of Jesus. Grace means God stoops low to free us from the judgment of others and free us from judging others. Grace means God doesn’t condemn or condone sin. He calls for change and then gives us the power to do it. Last week Scott showed us Grace makes us right with God and then shows us how to live rightly. Unlike the IRS, God does not demand that we justify ourselves or pay our debt. He freely pays all the penalties on the Cross and then declares us not guilty. He takes the test, we get the A. In every case, Grace is more than we deserve and greater than we imagine.

Jesus came and plunged our spiritual plumbing. He wants to flush out of you all the accumulated crud which builds up and blocks your soul’s pipeline. This is probably the dirtiest job of Grace: Forgiveness. Guilt tells us we don’t deserve forgiveness. Shame says we’re not worth forgiveness. Pride boasts we don’t need forgiveness. Anger balks at giving forgiveness. There are a lot of dirty jobs in life which make forgiveness difficult.

Being a parent is often a dirty, thankless job. One Mom was weary of the constant mess in her son’s room. Frustrated with his lack of distress over this disaster, Mom laid down the law. But this time she decided to be creative. For every item she picked up off the floor, he will have to pay her a dollar. At the end of the week, her son owed her 14 dollars. That Saturday, she found in his room an envelope with fifteen dollars and this note: “Thanks, Mom. Great work! Keep the change!”

Any relationship can be messy. No one is eager to forgive when they’ve been rejected. Max Lucado tells the story of a US soldier in Afghanistan who received a Dear John letter. His girlfriend ended the relationship by mail.

To add insult to injury, his girl wrote, “Please return my favorite picture of myself because I would like to use that photograph for my engagement picture in the county newspaper.” Ouch! But his buddies came to his defense. They went throughout the barracks and collected pictures of all the other soldiers’ girlfriends. They filled an entire shoebox. The jilted soldier mailed the photos to his ex-girlfriend with this note: “Please find your enclosed picture and return the rest. For the life of me I can’t remember which one you were.”<sup>1</sup>

Revenge may taste sweet but it leaves a bitter after taste.

Some acts are so dirty they’re near impossible to forgive. Victoria Ruvolo was driving to her home on Long Island after enjoying her niece’s recital in the city. The chill of that evening in November 2004 made her long for her comfortable couch in front of a warm fire. She doesn’t recall the eastbound silver Nissan nor the eighteen-year-old boy who threw, of all things, a frozen turkey at her windshield.

The twenty-pound bird crashed through the glass, bent the steering wheel inward, and shattered her face like a dinner plate on concrete. The violent prank left her grappling for life in the ICU. She survived but only after doctors wired her jaw, affixed one eye by synthetic film, and bolted titanium plates to her cranium. She can’t look in the mirror without a reminder of her hurt.

You weren’t hit by a turkey, but you married one, work for one, got left by one. Now where do you turn?<sup>2</sup>

Forgiveness. It’s a dirty job because of dirty deeds. That’s why Jesus shows us how to do it. Knowing that last acts leave lasting impressions, Jesus choose the night before His crucifixion to act out what He is all about.

The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. 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. (John 13:2-5)

Jesus did not wash his disciples’ hands, heads or faces. He washed their feet. Why feet? Feet stink. They get corns, calluses, blisters, bunions. Sometimes they make us sick. In one sermon I called sin the athlete’s foot of the soul since it grows in the dark. To illustrate this I put up a picture of an afflicted athlete’s foot. I’m still hearing from someone how disgusted they were by that image. Let’s face it: feet are rarely featured.

To really appreciate what a dirty job this is, consider this. When I go to a country in the developing world, one thing I miss is a sidewalk. Usually I don’t give sidewalks a

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<sup>1</sup> Max Lucado, *Grace: More than We Deserve, Greater than We Imagine*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002) p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> Lucado, p. 56.

second thought. They are merely a hard surface I shovel in the winter, weed in the summer and walk on in between. Yet in some countries where traffic is heavy and pedestrians are fair game, I wish for a place to get out of the way. In lands where roads are merely dirt and mud, I yearn for a clean, dry place to walk. In nations where sewers and sanitation are concepts whose time has not yet come, I constantly dodge puddles of water and piles of refuse. In places where animals roam free and there are no scooper laws, I crave a safe place to step. Oh how I long for a simple concrete path. Now, let me add one more point: at least I have shoes. Many in the third world do not.

Accordingly, a lot got caked on those disciples' feet. That's why in Jesus' day, it was customary for a host to provide a basin of water and towel to wash the road filth off his guests' feet when they come in the door. In wealthy homes this duty is assigned to the lowest servant. Maybe that's why no disciple offered to kneel and come nose to foot with his neighbor. They each waited for someone else to do it. Consequently, none of them washed up for supper. They dragged all their dirt right to dinner.

So Jesus uses this dirty job to "show them the full extent of his love" (John 13:1). The Last Supper did not happen the way you picture it with everyone sitting on one side of the table. In ancient times they all reclined on cushions with their heads toward the table and their bodies radiating like spokes from a hub. Resting their heads on their left hands and reaching for food with their right, they abruptly stop when their Master suddenly rises. Quietly He removes his outer clothing, wraps a towel around His waist, picks up a pitcher, and pours its contents into a basin. Then kneeling behind each disciple, Jesus baths their road stained feet with the water and wipes them dry with the towel from His waist. The students are stunned as they watch their Master silently perform the job of a slave for each of them.

Lying on their sides, powerlessly peering down at their Lord performing this humbling, humiliating service, they each focused on their feet. It's the place where you touch the earth, the body part most often stained and scarred by a sinful world. Thomas didn't deserve a footwashing – he had his doubts about Jesus. Philip likewise questioned the Lord. James and John offered to torch a Samaritan village in the name of God and secretly tried to grab the top positions in the new administration. Simon the Zealot had terroristic tendencies. Matthew was willing to sell out his own people. Yet Jesus goes around the room washing the stain and stink off each one.

Peter watches this drama with growing indignation. When the Master attempts to cleanse His feet, the fisherman vehemently refuses. "Lord ... you shall never wash my feet" (John 13:6, 8). He will not allow the Teacher to submit to this degrading act. Jesus instantly takes the air out of his protest. "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand. Unless I wash you, you have no part with me" (John 13:7, 8). Peter then swings to the opposite pole, 'Then, Lord, wash all of me: feet, hands and head!' 'All you need to wash are your feet,' Jesus replied.

He washes them all – even Judas, the guy who siphoned funds from the ministry, who sold out the King of the Universe for a bag of change. The Scriptures tell us Jesus, “knew who was going to betray him” (John 13:11) but He washed his feet just the same.

The Lord laid aside the soaking stained towel. He poured out the murky, dirty water in the basin. Then he put on His cloak and returned to His place at the table. ‘Do you understand what I have done for you?’ he asked them” (John 13:12). No. Only later do they understand the cloak He took off was the glory He laid aside when He descended from heaven to earth to serve. The towel is His life which wraps about us and wipes us clean by absorbing our sins. And the basin? When the Passover lambs are slain, the blood of this pure, spotless sacrifice is collected in a basin and thrown on the altar. Without the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God, you and I cannot be washed clean. Every one of us needs this washing. Each one of us, even Judas, can receive it.

Yet when He comes to you and me and offers to wash the place where the dirt of this earth has entered our lives, like Peter we issue Him orders. We tell God how we should be washed.

- I’m all right the way I am Lord. There’s nothing wrong with me. I don’t need you.
- You can wash me on the outside Jesus so people will see I’m squeaky clean. But don’t worry about the inside.
- Wash me all over Master. I’m spiritually dry and need a shot of God.
- Wash this part of me Lord, but don’t touch that one spot. That’s mine. I don’t mind if it’s dirty.

Jesus won’t submit to our orders. He knows what needs to be washed in us and where and when. There are two things He requires of us. We must surrender to Him and let Him wash us as He sees fit. You know what spots need cleansing. You can hide them from everyone else. There may even be some hidden from you. Yet you can’t hold them back from Him. For “unless I wash you,” He says, “you have no part in me.” Let Him wash you – thoroughly, completely, daily. This is not once and done. It’s wash, rinse, repeat. Let His forgiveness wash over you.

The second command is for you to wash others.

You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. 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. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. (John 13:13-17)

Perhaps you are saying: “How can I forgive the one who used his or her feet to walk out on me when I was in need, to step on me when I was hurting, to kick me when I was

down, to run away with something precious to me – my hard-earned money, my spouse, my beloved child, my heart? How can I wash feet so calloused they don't care how I feel, feet so handicapped I never get a break from caring for them nor appreciation for doing so, feet so foul they constantly leave messes for me to clean up. How can I wash the feet of my Thomas who doubts me, my Peter who denies me, my Judas who betrays me?"

Forgiveness: it's a dirty job. Yet if Jesus has washed your feet and forgiven your sins, He then hands you the towel and the basin and tells you to get busy. Throughout the New Testament forgiveness from God is frequently paired with forgiving others – just like two feet. Jesus even enshrined this in His prayer: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). Forgiveness does not mean the past did not happen. It's a decision not to live there. Forgiveness does not wipe away the need for justice or consequences or change. Forgiveness may not change the other person at all. Judas walked away on squeaky clean feet to betray Jesus. Forgiveness gets you out from under the foot of bitterness, resentment and revenge. Forgiveness keeps your side of the street clean. Forgiveness opens the door for reconciliation in the hope that one day the other person will walk through it. Forgiveness of this type requires Grace.

If you allow Him, Jesus will wash the sin stained lives of others through you. It will require humility and courage for you to kneel and serve others as Jesus did. There are multitudes of people who look perfectly clean on the outside and yet are dying on the inside to be cleansed by Christ.

To accept grace is to accept the vow to give it. Victoria Ruvolo did. Nine months after her disastrous November night, she stood face to titanium-bolted face with her offender in court. Ryan Cushing was no longer the cocky, turkey-tossing kid in the Nissan. He was trembling, tearful, and apologetic. People packed the room to see him get his comeuppance. The judge's sentence enraged them – only six months behind bars, five years' probation, some counseling, and public service.

The courtroom erupted. Everyone objected. Everyone, that is, except Victoria Ruvolo. The reduced sentence was her idea. The boy walked over, and she embraced him. In full view of the judge and the crowd, she held him tight, stroked his hair. He sobbed, and she spoke: "I forgive you. I want our life to be the best it can be."

She allowed grace to shape her response. "God gave me a second chance at life, and I passed it on," she says of her largess. "If I hadn't let go of that anger, I'd be consumed by this need for revenge. Forgiving him helps me move on."

Her mishap led to her mission: volunteering with the county probation department. "I'm trying to help others, but I know for the rest of my life I'll be known as 'The Turkey Lady.' Could have been worse. He could have thrown a ham. I'd be Miss Piggy!"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lucado, p. 59-60.

It's a dirty job, but somebody has to do it.  
How about you?