

# Who is the Greatest? -- Luke 22:24

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Please bow your heads with me for prayer. "Lord, we need You. We need to hear a message from You. Because You care about us, I know that You have something to say to us, that is just what we need to hear. I ask that Your Spirit would use me as a means of communicating this to each person here today. In Jesus' name, amen."

In our previous Communion services we have considered the background and setting of the Communion service. We have learned that this service was born out of the Passover festival. This festival was a celebration of the Israelite's deliverance from Egypt, where they had been slaves. Every year would begin with this celebration as soon as the spring barley crop became ready for harvest.

Today we will begin a new journey which will continue for the next several communion services. We will look at the background and meaning of the foot-washing service. The practice of washing each other's feet may seem out-dated and old-fashioned. But it is not a unique practice to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Many other denominations practice this ordinance as well, including orthodox churches in Europe and Asia as well as Protestants, such as Pentecostals and Baptists. Each church does it a little differently and at different times, but it remains an important part of the worldwide Christian church. And, as we will discover in future communion services, the experience of foot-washing is similar to a re-baptism experience. It's a time where you can be washed clean, similarly to when you were baptized.

As we look at the background to the foot-washing service, let's consider what the practice was in the Jewish culture. There were different settings in which someone would wash another's feet. The first is between a host and his guests. Both Abraham and Lot are recorded in the book of Genesis as washing the feet of their guests. In the Oriental culture this was a common act of hospitality. Today it would be like offering a guest at your house a glass of water. A second setting for foot-washing was between a master and his servant. When the master would enter his house or tent at the end of the day, a servant would be there to wash his feet. It was a way in which the master could be refreshed after being gone all day. A third setting for foot-washing in the Jewish culture involved a husband and his wife. I'm sure many men today would like to reinstitute this practice in their household. A nice foot bath from your wife at the end of a long day would be nice. A fourth setting for foot-washing was between a father and his children. Children in those days gave a lot of respect to their parents. Unfortunately this is not often the case in our society. And I would say that the parents are the ones responsible for this.

So, these are some settings in the Jewish culture when foot-washing took place. This act was both symbolic as a gesture of respect and practical as well. Anyone who is familiar with the culture or languages in the Eastern countries knows that respect for your superiors is very strong and pervasive. I have learned a little Korean and some Nepali. And in both languages respect is built in. The common greeting in Korean is accompanied by putting the hands together along with a slight bow. In Nepali there are four words for "you", depending on who you are speaking to and the amount of respect that is needed. And so it was in the Jewish culture. Respect for your superiors was emphasized very strongly. And that is one of the reasons why the practice of foot-washing was a part of their culture.

But this practice had good practical reasons as well. People in those days walked on dirt roads with sandals on. By the end of the day their feet were covered with dust, mud, and often animal manure. The roads were traveled by animals as much as they were by people. Donkeys and camels were common pack animals, used for carrying people and goods. Being an agricultural society I'm sure many sheep and oxen frequented the dirt roads as well. So by the end of the day people's feet were quite dirty, and certainly a good foot-washing was much needed.

Now that we have a little understanding of foot-washing in the Jewish culture, let's spend a few minutes considering the setting of the first foot-washing service, administered by Jesus Himself in the upper room. This occasion is unique to John and Luke's accounts. While Luke gives a description of the setting, only John records the actual experience of foot-washing. I invite you to turn with me to Luke 22:24. (Read) Here we are given a description of the mood and feeling present in the upper room the evening that Jesus washed the feet of His disciples. Many scholars believe that the words of Jesus given in verses 25-30 of Luke 22 are soon after Jesus and His disciples had finished the Passover meal. Luke describes the mood that pervaded the disciples at this time. In New King James Bible it says "there was also rivalry among them." This word translated "rivalry" means a "quarrel". They are perhaps being quiet about it, since Jesus is present. But their emotions are very stirred up. They are upset with each other, because each one wants to be first in the kingdom they believe Jesus is about to set up there in Jerusalem.

This rivalry, though, was not new to the upper room. A few chapters back, in Luke 9:46-48, a similar situation is described. This event took place perhaps six months before the incident mentioned in Luke chapter 22. Here Luke says there was a dispute among them as to who would be the greatest. The word translated "dispute" in Luke 9:46 is a term meaning a "discussion". It is not as strong a word as is used in Luke 22. They are disagreeing, but it hasn't escalated too much yet. There was another time mentioned in Matthew chapter 20 verses 20-28. This event took place perhaps one week before the upper room experience of Luke 22. James and John, together with their mother, came to Jesus with a request. They asked Jesus if one of them could sit on His left and one on His right when He would establish His kingdom. Some scholars believe James and John felt justified in asserting themselves because they were Jesus' cousins. Their mother was possibly the sister of Jesus' mother, Mary. This request by James and John caused quite a reaction from the other ten disciples. Matthew says they were "moved with indignation". The discussion turned into a heated debate.

And now in Luke 22 there in the upper room, the heated debate had evolved into a quarrel that was about to break up the group. Some disciples were so offended that they were ready to walk out and never come back. Others felt so unappreciated that they were considering quitting as a disciple of Jesus.

How did Jesus respond to this mood in the upper room? He didn't preach another sermon on being a servant. He didn't lecture them. He brought this divided group together by washing their feet. He revealed a different kind of leadership. While the leaders of the world were pursuing greatness for their own honor, Jesus revealed the heart of a servant. Being a leader in the world is completely different from being a leader in the church. Jesus gives us an example of a Christian leader. It's someone who doesn't step on people in order to elevate themselves. It's someone who helps others get ahead of them.

Today we have the great privilege of stooping down. We have the opportunity to follow Jesus' example. For those who would like to take advantage of this opportunity we will now divide up for our foot-washing service. The men will be serving each other in the school wing, while the ladies will be serving each other in the fellowship hall. When you come back into the sanctuary, please remember to sit in every other row.

