

Washing the Feet of the Homeless:

My testimony of Grace

By Kenneth Beck

We heard about the “Operation Care Dallas” ministry on the radio station KCBI on Tuesday. My wife was crying when she called me and told me of how they needed volunteers to wash the feet of the homeless and that she wanted to be involved with that. Naturally, loving my wife’s heart of compassion for people, I could not say no. I got online and found all the information I could and I signed us up as “Foot Washers.”

No sooner than the commitment was made, things began to get difficult. First, I began thinking about the difficulty of even looking at another person’s dirty feet; this gave me guilt for my lack of compassion and faith. My wife was pulled into the middle of an emotional argument at the school where she works, between another teacher and the principal. Against my wife’s opposition, she was appointed to the position of leadership the other teacher held, which only caused more tension. The weather turned stormy, and we were getting no rest at night as our tension began to rise over various circumstances on many sides.

We had little money in the bank and no gas in either vehicle, and I began to wonder if we were going to be able to keep our commitment. Friday afternoon, I prayed in my heart as I was driving around in the rain and cold doing some things I had promised my brother I would do for him. Through my diligence to keep that small promise to help ease my brother’s tension, the Lord made me realize that He is the one who appointed us to this and that He is the one who would see it through. So I girded up the loins of my faith and placed my trust solely in the Lord Jesus, believing he would provide what we needed to do the job he had set before us. We were not disappointed.

Friday night arrived finally, and somehow we had the house to ourselves as the children went to different places since we had to get up Saturday at five A.M. to get to Dallas by eight A.M. I had been praying pretty constantly in my heart that the Lord would prepare us and make us able to do the work he set before us. Friday night we slept like babies, even though we were awakened by loud thunder and violent rain, we were up on time and fully refreshed. The best we had slept all week. Also that evening, the Lord began to fill my heart with scripture and the desire to give of myself unlike ever before. Upon waking, the one verse going through my mind over and over was the words of Peter from the book of Acts, “Money have I none but what I have I give you. I give you Jesus Christ.”

We prayed before we left the house and immediately our hearts were filled with joy and a desire to go as the Lord commanded. A song derived from a Psalm of David began to go through my mind and gave me joy, “You shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace, the mountains and the hills will break before you, there will be shouts of joy and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.” I thought of the trees and it occurred to me how windy it was supposed to be that day, truly the trees were clapping their hands! The traffic was not bad at all, though we missed our exit and came in the long way around, got lost on the mix master and ended up in downtown Dallas trying to find the convention center. My wife was shaking due to a near miss on the freeway from some lunatic driver who cut us off. But we arrived at the convention center with fifteen minutes to spare and had no problem finding parking.

We walked to where the gathering was to take place, and there were already hundreds of homeless gathered in line getting doughnuts and coffee, and waiting for ten o’clock when they could get inside. We went in signed in with the admission personnel and found our place of ministry. We were amazed at what one little lady from the Philippines had accomplished. Susie Jennings, known as ‘The Blanket Lady’ by many of the homeless in Dallas, has done just an amazing work and is full of compassion for the homeless as I have never seen before. I was moved by her joy and kindness toward everyone. The mayor of Dallas proclaimed December 15th as “Care

Dallas 2007” day in her honor and as she stepped up to the podium to welcome the volunteers the first thing she said was, “How many of you have been tested this week?” We all cheered and said amen and halleluiah and she continued with her thanking God and us, that we overcame the obstacles and sacrificed our time in the name of Jesus. Mayor Leppert made his speech and alluded to the saving grace through Christ Jesus, and his councilman, with the backing of the entire city council, gave full credit praising Jesus for what he has led this little lady to do. He almost restored my hope for politicians! We prayed together and began to get ready to receive the homeless.

As I said, we were there to wash the feet of the homeless. This is something I had never done, never even considered doing outside of the spiritual sense of encouraging my brothers in Christ. Some of the volunteers were podiatrists who had come to help with advice and looking over possible infections. One doctor was there for the fourth year. Another I spoke with was there for the first time, and he said he was just overwhelmed at the grace and love that was shown. I told them both how I appreciated their coming and they told me, “You’re the ones doing the dirty work. The chances of infections spreading to you are high.” I said, “Look, God appointed us to this and I have no fear of that, these people just need some compassion.” They agreed with me and gave me hope that there might still be some good doctors in the world.

The people lined up in hopes of getting new shoes and socks as another man and myself began to welcome them and chat with them. I took the first one to my wife who more than joyfully put her arm around him and gently talked him into letting her wash his feet. He was so kind and she made him feel as though he was a man who was loved. I was choking back tears the whole time as I am now, while writing this story, remembering the incredible beauty of what was happening. I began to want to wash someone’s feet as I watched volunteers from the ages of 8 to 65 do what they committed to do. Finally, the greeter volunteer gave me a man and I had no choice. I sat him down and spoke with him about shoes and asked him if he wanted his feet washed. He was reluctant and a little embarrassed, and I said, “Hey brother, this is what I came here for, and it will be good for your feet. Let me serve you.” He smiled and said, “Ok, it might make my feet feel better.” I gently pulled his old shoes off his feet and his dirty socks while I spoke with him about the gathering and the weather.

As I looked at his feet, dried and yellowed for lack of proper hygiene, I thought about my position there on my knees before a man who is rejected of society. Then the words of my Lord Jesus filled my mind as I prayed for courage, “Whatsoever you do unto the least of these my brethren, you do unto me.” I realized for the first time in my life the incredible thing the Lord done when he gave example to the disciples by washing their feet

The sacrifice of self, overcoming personal bias, putting myself in a place that few are willing to go, made Christ Jesus more real to me in that moment than ever before in my life. I have seen the grace of God toward me in many answered prayers and rescuing me from potentially bad situations. I thought I had a grasp on the Gospel until that moment that I reached out and placed my hands on that man’s sore foot. The moment I had to understand that all of us were wretched, poor, blind, and naked before God Almighty, yet Christ Jesus gave up everything to save us from damnation. To cleanse us from the infection of sin and selfish rebellion, and now he appointed me to this man to help save him from the potential of infected feet, to relieve this one man from a little pain both in his feet and in his heart. I loved him more than I love myself, more than I love my comforts of home, and I praised God for such an opportunity to imitate my God and my Savior. When I finished and he had some new comfortable shoes that were easy on his bunions and I asked him if he wanted me to pray for him. He was delighted and I took his hand in mine and on my knees prayed for God to bless him and help him and fill him with the Gospel and the Holy Spirit. He was for a moment happy, laughing and smiling, and I had the joy of hugging him.

I spent much of my time helping others who were washing feet, and as I looked over the areas where we worked, I saw children washing feet and praying for people. I saw men and women smiling and laughing and sharing the Gospel, hugging and praying. I saw watery eyes full of compassion and joy. There were no miraculous healings that I know of, there was no loud preaching of hell and damnation, only people sharing the love of Christ with people of all walks of life, of every color, with absolutely no prejudice of any kind. There

were people from many different denominations; over 200 churches showed up to support this ministry as well as people who have no church home. They were all simply Christians doing a work in the name of Jesus Christ. My wife and I met a family from near where we live who informed us they have a family ministry to the homeless right here in our area. This was significant to me, but not a surprise, as I had been wondering Friday if there were any such ministry or outreach here. I asked for his information and plan to help him somehow. I suspect the Lord has given me new direction to go in ministry, and I want to continue to support Miss Susie's ministry.

The children that were there were the most impressive, their parents ought to be commended for raising them with such a heart. There was a young boy I guess to be around eight or nine years old. Shoes were getting hard to find, and the line was still very long. Most of the common men's sizes ran out pretty early, and we had to search for shoes that would fit, and some just didn't get any shoes because of that. As I was helping a young man and his girlfriend, this young boy came up and asked what size I needed. When I told him, he was off quickly, almost running. He soon came back and said, "I have looked all over and I just can't find anything." He was almost in tears. I put my hand on his shoulder and said, "let's go see what we can do." We went behind the curtain and that boy went through shoe after shoe to try to find just the right one for that young girl. We found two pair to try and she liked one of them. That boy was overjoyed and scurried off to help another. Later, I saw him helping a girl washing the feet of a couple, and I saw him sorting shoes into sizes and styles, then later he was helping to pack up the leftovers.

At the end of the day there was Oliver Brown. As I was looking for a pair of shoes for a lady who was washing feet, a young man came and said that the man he was helping wanted a certain size. He asked me what to tell him, since we didn't have any more of that size. I told him he needed to try to comfort him and try to explain that there is just nothing we can do. I stepped through the curtain with the shoes I had found and after giving them to the lady who needed them, that young man grabbed my arm and said, "He just won't take no for an answer, can you talk to him?" I came over and knelt down and asked what it was he needed and tried to explain that we only had small sizes left. He said he just needed some shoes that didn't hurt so bad that anything would do. He needed a size eight for men, but the eights were all gone except for hard shoes or plastic slippers.

I found three pairs that might work since he had on six pairs of old socks, and brought them to him. He was delighted that I had shoes in my hands and tried two on that just were too small but the one pair I had that worked was a pair of ladies shoes that did not look feminine. He asked me if they were men's shoes and I said, "Well -- not really, but they are not feminine and they will keep your feet warm. They are more of a unisex kind of style, that means they are either-or." He smiled at that, and we began to have a good conversation. Mr. Brown had pink splotches on his hands and face, scarred and scabbed over, and I asked him what had happened to his hands. He told me how he had gotten chemical burns from a work accident some time ago and that it was over most of his body. He began to tell me how the doctors couldn't do much to help him and that when he regained consciousness in the hospital after an operation he was told there was not much hope for him. He said, "Ya know, I heard these words in my head, no one ever told me it was from the Bible and I had never read the Bible before. But the word were, 'By his stripes are you healed' then someone gave me a Bible and I read that passage and I knew that God spoke that to me." He quoted the whole verse to me and said that is Jesus, and if it were not for him, he wouldn't be here.

He told me how now he has a spot on his lung and sometimes can't breathe but he believes God has him here for a reason. I said, "Well, my Brother, if you go out of this world go out preachin the Gospel!" He said, "That's right! That's what I am goin ta do." When we were finished, I asked him if he wanted to pray with me and he said yes. As I put my hand on his knee to steady myself he said, "You can hold my hand, I'm not contagious." I took his hand in mine and looked him in the eyes and said, "I know, even if you were, it wouldn't matter, I would have held your hand anyway." He smiled and said I was very kind. I prayed for him and started to get up but was stopped as Mr. Brown began to pray. He prayed for me! I held that man tight in my arms and thanked him for praying for me. All the grime on his clothes didn't matter, this man who probably won't live through the next year, prayed for me when I was supposed to be ministering blessings on him! I will never

forget that man, and I will never forget the blessings and joy of that moment. “Ollie Brown” is going to make a good song I think, I made him smile when I told him what a jazzy sound his name has to it.

My wife Teresa found me and asked me to help wash another couple’s feet. We sat together talking with them and rubbing their feet, laughing and smiling. This lady was a big lady who had recently been in the hospital and her foot was swollen. I asked the doctor to take a look and he asked her if she was taking anything for the swelling. She explained that she was supposed to get a prescription but couldn’t get it because she has to walk to the other side of town, and it is painful. I saw the doctor’s eyes well up for a moment then he pulled back his sorrow and began to advise her on what to do. Her husband was telling me how he had surgery on his foot and could not feel his toes or move them. He was happy to have shoes that fit, and as I washed the other foot he began to giggle and move his foot telling me how it tickled. I laughed and said, “You can feel that one huh?” still giggling he said, “Oh yea, I can feel it.” We finished and held hands, all four of us, as I prayed for them and thanked God for bringing us there to help them. They hugged us and told us how they appreciated the kindness and conversation.

There are many homeless for thousands of reasons. Some are what is called “professional homeless,” those who pretend to be homeless for whatever reason. Others simply want to be where they are; they have made a life of it and have no responsibility, and they like it that way. I have met and ministered to people like this before. Still others are homeless and truly want to have a better life and a home. Many are whole families with little children who have lost their homes due to loss of work and had no one to turn to. They may not have qualified for state help or just don’t have the knowledge as to what to do. Many we met were first time homeless folk and were frightened and embarrassed. One thing in all of this that occurred to me is that Jesus never was concerned with how or why people were in the situation they were in. He helped them where they were and how they were with no questions about the past. We had to do the same through this ministry, help the people because they simply needed help. No questions as to why or how they got where they are, they would voluntarily tell us things, and we would have to bring them back to now and reassure them we were there to help them and bless them as much as we were able, not to judge them.

This is the way of our Lord and savior with all of us. He knows that we already have sorrow and guilt over the past, and he deals with us in the present and says, “Your sins are cast as far as the east is from the west.” He never throws our past up in our face but guides to the future hope that he alone has given us in Himself. This is grace and mercy to the fullest extent, and we should all praise him for it. We must take a fresh look at what the Lord has done on the cross and become like him in the way we treat one another. These are the marks of Christ, the fruit of the Spirit. I am so glad I was appointed to this task and blessed not so much for the service but by serving.