

*Kissing The Feet Of The One Who Said,
Don't Kiss Anyone's Feet*

Matthew 4: 18-25

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I like reading David Bentley Hart's translation of The New Testament because I often pick up something new. And when preparing to reflect on a passage, I like to read a few chapters on either side of the passage, to put the day's lesson in context. For today's lesson, that meant starting at the beginning of Matthew's gospel, the birth narrative, and working up to the point where Jesus calls his first disciples.

Reading from the beginning of the gospel, I detected a theme that I'd not noticed before, because of the way Hart translates one Greek word—*proskynesai*.

The New Revised Standard Version and the Oxford Study Version, the two translations with which I'm most familiar, translates *proskynesai* as "pay homage," as in, the magi look for the new-born king of the Jews to pay homage to him.

But Hart translates this Greek as "make obeisance," as in, the magi look for the new-born king to make obeisance to him. Or Satan tempts Jesus in the wilderness to make obeisance to Satan, but Jesus says he makes obeisance only to God.

In a footnote, Hart writes that *proskynesai*, or make obeisance, means to bow low before a superior, to lay flat on the floor and kiss the feet of a superior, which was a common practice in that culture.

For me, to *make obeisance* is a far more evocative term than to "pay homage."

Paying homage—humbling oneself to honor another—is powerful.

But approaching your superior on your knees, then lying flat on the floor and kissing your superior's feet, is paying homage on steroids. It's the most extreme version of paying homage. It communicates unquestioning loyalty and obedience to one's superior.

Which is what the superior person wants. It's not about the kiss on the foot, it's about the loyalty and obedience. When your superior says, come, follow me, you immediately drop what you're doing, and without question, you follow, loyal and obedient.

Which is precisely how Matthew describes the four fishermen responding to Jesus when Jesus tells them to follow him—immediately, without question.

By their response to Jesus—immediate, without question—these four fisherman model the behavior of people who make obeisance to Jesus. People who make obeisance to Jesus do what he says, immediately, without question.

Matthew develops this theme of making obeisance—of responding to one's superior immediately, without question—throughout the opening chapters of his gospel, with one illustration after another.

Right off the bat, Joseph prepares to quietly separate from Mary because she's pregnant, but God instructs Joseph in dream to stay with Mary. Without a question, Joseph follows God's instruction. He does so again, when God instructs him to flee with Mary and Jesus to Egypt, and yet again, when God instructs him to return with Mary and Jesus. Joseph is a model of immediate, unquestioning obedience to God, a model of how one makes obeisance to God.

When the magi find Jesus, they make obeisance to him. Then God instructs them to disobey Herod by not reporting back to him. Without question, the magi follow God's instructions, and disobey Herod's.

John the Baptist declares that Jesus is his superior, and that John is unfit to carry Jesus' sandals, let alone baptize Jesus. But Jesus insists that John baptize him, so John does, immediately, without question.

Jesus retreats to the wilderness where Satan offers Jesus control over all the world's kingdoms in exchange for Jesus making obeisance to Satan. If Jesus lies flat on the ground before Satan and kisses Satan's feet, if Jesus pledges his loyalty and obedience to Satan, then Satan will give Jesus control over everyone on earth. Jesus tells Satan that he makes obeisance to God, and to God alone.

Jesus leaves the wilderness and encounters four fishermen. He tells them to follow him. Immediately, without question, they drop what they're doing and follow him.

Loyalty and obedience, immediate and unquestioned—according to Matthew, that's the proper human response to God when God instructs you, and to Jesus when Jesus calls you.

Matthew portrays Joseph, the magi, John the Baptist, Jesus, and the first disciples as people who make obeisance to God and to Jesus.

I don't know about you, but I find myself recoiling at the thought of immediate, unquestioned obedience. I can feel my whole being—body and soul—reacting against immediate, unquestioned obedience.

So I have to step back from my personal family history, from my feelings about authority, control, and obedience, to appreciate what Matthew is saying here.

In Matthew's Gospel, God and Jesus are infinitely superior to every human on earth in terms of their holiness, righteousness, and justice. Therefore, one can trust God and Jesus in a way that one cannot trust any finite human on earth.

Trusting in God and Jesus, fully, completely, one is loyal to God and Jesus, fully, completely, and one obeys God and Jesus, immediately, without question. This is the model Matthew establishes, early in his gospel, for the proper human response to God and Jesus.

Not only is this the only proper response to God and Jesus, *God and Jesus are the only ones to whom one should respond in this manner*. It's to God and Jesus, to God and Jesus alone, that one must remain absolutely loyal, and respond to immediately, without question.

It's to God and Jesus, and to God and Jesus alone, that one should make obeisance. Not to any other human on earth. Because no human on earth is infinitely holy, righteous, and just.

Do not immediately obey any human on earth, without question. Only God and Jesus. I think Matthew himself recoiled at the thought of giving anyone on earth his immediate, unquestioned obedience. To God and Jesus alone.

But what happens when human beings demand that other humans make obeisance to them?

What happens when a human demands that other humans acknowledge that she is superior in all ways—that she exists on another level, a superior level of genius and skill, over all others?

What happens when a human demands that other humans acknowledge that his power is privileged, his power is off-the-charts, his power is unlimited, unrestricted, uncontainable,

uncontrollable by others, and that others must obey his every instruction immediately, unquestioningly?

What happens when a human demands for herself what Matthew says belongs exclusively to God and Jesus?

When a human, far from being holy, righteous and just, steals from God and Jesus what belongs only to God and Jesus, and claims it for himself?

What happens when a human plays God?

Bad things happen.

And what happens when humans readily lie down and kiss the feet of another human in exchange for something?

When humans obey another's every command immediately, without question.

Bad things happen.

Because no human on earth is sufficiently holy, righteous, and just to wield that kind of power over other humans.

Do not lay before another human foot and kiss it in exchange for something, Matthew says. Refuse to. Because bad things will happen.

And yet it happens all the time.

It's not difficult to make a connection to what Matthew says about making obeisance, and what's happening in our country right now with the impeachment trial.

Lots of men and women in Congress, and throughout the political establishment, are laying on the floor kissing Donald Trump's feet, as he demands they do in exchange for his blessing on their political survival.

But if we take Matthew at his word, as the author of one of our gospels, then making obeisance to Donald Trump violates the gospel.

If we take Matthew at his word, there's a clear gospel imperative to refuse to kiss Donald Trump's feet.

No human on earth is sufficiently holy, righteous, and just to deserve the obeisance that Donald Trump is demanding. There's a gospel imperative to withhold it from him, and from everyone.

Yet people are not withholding it. And bad things are happening.

But let's not ourselves off the hook.

We all live in a hierarchical society, with people of superior rank and people of inferior rank.

People with more power and people with less power.

People above others and people below others.

People who're further up in line and people who're further back in line.

People who're getting their feet kissed, and people who're doing the kissing.

We see this get played out on all kinds of levels, big and small, obvious and subtle, throughout our society, in our own relationships and encounters with people.

Hierarchical behavior is deeply engrained within us, in our psyches, our primate roots.

The gospel exposes these habitual hierarchical attitudes and behaviors, and challenges us to be transformed out of them by being transformed into a non-hierarchical set of attitudes and behaviors.

This is what I mean, in part, when I say that I see Jesus primarily as a teacher of humility. Jesus teaches—don't kiss anyone's feet, and don't make anyone, or let anyone, kiss your feet.

Non-hierarchical radical equality.

Humble yourself to honor others, but don't kiss anyone's feet.

Wash people's feet, serve them. But don't kiss anyone's feet.

I see Jesus as a radically non-hierarchical egalitarian person living in a very hierarchical, unequal society. To paraphrase my favorite line from Karl Barth—Jesus contradicted his society in a way that was filled with promise.

Because he was a radically non-hierarchical egalitarian man, rabbi, prophet, messiah, openly contradicting his very hierarchical, unequal society, a clash between Jesus and his society was inevitable.

Jesus convinced some people that living in a non-hierarchical way was possible, with practice.

He called this way of living the kingdom of God.

And he instructed people how to live this way, he showed them how to relate to God as the all holy, all righteous, all just One, and how to relate to one another as equals.

The people at the top of the hierarchy, those with the most to gain by defending it, and the most to lose by changing it, threatened Jesus.

But Jesus refused to kiss their feet. So the people at the top killed him.

But his followers, those who made obeisance to him, claimed Jesus rose from the dead, that he lived again. And his followers kept alive the spiritual aspiration to live as equals.

Now, the early church quickly conformed to the hierarchical, unequal ways we humans tend to operate. The church quickly became hierarchical and unequal.

Yet, the Christ-like spiritual aspiration to live with all others as equals has tenaciously held on, and it's continued to express itself in the world. It's like a light that burns in the darkness, a light the darkness cannot comprehend, but cannot overcome.

Reflecting on all of this, I now more fully appreciate the spiritual practice in which one kisses the foot of Jesus, either in one's imagination, or in a cathedral, lying flat on the floor at the foot of a statue.

Kissing the foot of Jesus—what a radical gesture.

To kiss the foot of the one who teaches—never kiss anyone's foot, and never make anyone, or even let anyone, kiss your foot.

To kiss the foot of the one who says, this is my way—wash the feet of the least in your society, the most outcast, those with the dirtiest feet, but never kiss the foot of anyone, especially those who demand it.

To kiss Jesus' foot is to say, yes, Jesus, I will do that, I will follow your way, immediately, without question. I will live with all others as an equal.

May we kiss his foot.