

John 13:9

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Simon Peter saith unto him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.

Analysis

Simon Peter saith unto him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head. Peter's characteristic impulsiveness swings from absolute refusal (v.8) to maximal request. The emphatic negation **not...only** (οὐ...μόνον/ou...monon) followed by **but also** (ἀλλὰ καί/alla kai) intensifies his plea. If cleansing by Christ brings fellowship, Peter wants complete cleansing—**my hands and my head** (τὰς χεῖρας καὶ τὴν κεφαλήν/tas cheiras kai tēn kephalēn).

Peter's request, though sincere, reveals continuing misunderstanding. He grasps that Christ's cleansing is necessary but thinks more ritual washing brings more spiritual benefit. This reflects a works-oriented mindset: if some is good, more is better; if feet-washing grants fellowship, full-body washing grants greater fellowship. Yet grace doesn't operate on quantitative scales. The sufficiency of Christ's work needs no human addition or intensification.

Peter's response also shows genuine love for Christ. Once convinced that Jesus's washing brings 'part with me,' Peter desires maximum communion. His error isn't in wanting closeness with Christ but in thinking human enthusiasm or religious excess achieves it. This anticipates later misunderstandings about salvation by grace through faith—legalists add requirements, enthusiasts add experiences, but the gospel says Christ's work alone suffices.

Historical Context

Peter's request makes sense within Jewish purity rituals. Levitical law prescribed washings of hands, feet, and head for priests (Exodus 30:19-21). The Pharisees emphasized ritual hand-washing before meals (Mark 7:2-4). If Jesus's foot-washing symbolized spiritual cleansing, Peter reasoned, complete washing would be better. This reflects the broader Jewish emphasis on ritual purity as means to holiness. What Peter hadn't yet grasped was that Jesus was instituting something entirely new—not enhanced Levitical ritual but spiritual cleansing through His impending death. The church fathers saw Peter's request as emblematic of misguided religious zeal—the desire to add to Christ's sufficient work. Augustine commented that Peter's error wasn't in loving Christ too much but in understanding grace too little.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

1 John 4:8 — God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. In what ways do we, like Peter, try to add to Christ's finished work through increased religious activity or intensity?
2. How does Peter's swing from 'never' to 'not only my feet' illustrate the volatility of enthusiasm untethered to theological understanding?
3. What does true faith look like—enthusiastic maximalism or humble reception of what Christ offers?

Interlinear Text

λέγει	αὐτῷ	Σίμων	Πέτρος	Κύριε	μὴ	τοὺς	πόδας	μου
saith	unto him	Simon	Peter	Lord	not	G3588	feet	my
G3004	G846	G4613	G4074	G2962	G3361		G4228	G3450
μόνον	ἀλλὰ	καὶ	τὰς	χεῖρας	καὶ	τὴν	κεφαλήν	
only	but	also	G3588	my hands	also	G3588	my head	
G3440	G235	G2532		G5495	G2532		G2776	

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 51:2 (Parallel theme): Wash me throughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

Psalms 51:7 (Parallel theme): Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

1 Peter 3:21 (Parallel theme): The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ:

Hebrews 10:22 (Parallel theme): Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.

Psalms 26:6 (References Lord): I will wash mine hands in innocency: so will I compass thine altar, O LORD: