

4. Other topics

Should we shake off the dust of our feet?

Dafydd Jenkins

The command to shake off the dust of the feet was primarily a witness against the Jews. The only recorded incident of its use is found in Acts 13, where Paul and Barnabas do so at Antioch in Pisidia. Some relevant Old Testament background is found in Isaiah 52, where the shaking off of dust is mentioned in the context of preaching, and Leviticus 14, which concerns the scraping of a leprous house.

MATTHEW 10:14 STATES: “And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet”. All three of the Synoptic Gospels record this instruction among those that Jesus gave to the twelve, when sending them out on their preaching mission as part of their development towards the apostolic work that followed his ascension.

The practice was familiar to the Jews of the time, having been adopted by pious Jews who shook off the dust from their feet when re-entering the Land after a journey, as a mark of their separation from the Gentiles. As such it would have been readily understood by a Jewish audience, which perhaps explains the omission in Matthew of Jesus’ following words: “for a testimony against them” (Mk. 6:11; Lk. 9:5). The action enacted a powerful witness that those Jews who failed to receive the word of the gospel were estranged from the covenants of promise, through their rejection of the Seed of Abraham; and, while the seed of Abraham would be as numerous as the dust of the earth, the seed would be made up of those who shared Abraham’s faith drawn from all nations rather than by natural descent.

The form the witness takes recalls Isaiah 52, where, in response to the message of the gospel preachers, “How beautiful upon the mountains are *the feet* of him that bringeth good tidings” (v. 7), Jerusalem is urged, “*Shake* thyself from *the dust*” (v. 2), in readiness for her release from captivity

and Gentile domination. To this is added a call to separation that echoes the language of the law of leprosy: “Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing; go ye out of the midst of her; be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the LORD” (v. 11). In short, the King has come, the Kingdom is being established with the full cleansing from sin that his

work provides. To refuse the heralds of the King is to refuse the King himself and choose to be numbered with the Gentiles.

The only record of shaking off the dust of the feet being conducted is found in Acts 13:51 after the rejection of the gospel in the mouth of Paul and Barnabas by the Jews of Antioch in Pisidia: “But they shook off the dust of their feet against them, and came unto Iconium”. The address of Paul in the synagogue of Antioch has marked parallels with the argument of Peter presented on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, but instead of the response of that occasion the Jews respond in envy to the multitudes attending the following sabbath when “came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God” (v. 44). The event is part of the inexorable movement of the work of Christ away from Jerusalem to reach out to the Gentiles, and shaking off “the dust of their feet against them” (v. 51) notes a significant milestone in the progress of the gospel in the record in Acts.

Interestingly, the Lord includes a similar instruction as he sends out the seventy, who in their number and the location to which they are sent—Perea on the other side of the Jordan—anticipate the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles. Specifically, the seventy are sent out as heralds, “sent . . . before his face into every city and place, whither he himself would come” (Lk. 10:1). The pattern of their work reflects those who announce the coming of Christ to the cities of the world. Among their directions we read, “But into

whatsoever city ye enter, and they receive you not, go your ways out into the streets of the same, and say, Even the very dust of your city, which cleaveth on us, we do wipe off against you: notwithstanding be ye sure of this, that the kingdom of God is come nigh unto you" (vv. 10,11). The Lord employs a different expression to that used when sending out the twelve, found only here within the New Testament and rendered "wipe off" in the Authorised Version. The Greek word, however, means 'scrape away', and recalls Leviticus 14, where, among the commands for dealing with the plague of leprosy in a house, we find:

"and he shall cause the house to be *scraped* within round about, and they shall pour out *the dust that they scrape off* without the city into an unclean place" (v. 41);

"And if the plague come again, and break out in the house, after that he hath taken away the stones, and after he hath *scraped* the house, and after it is plastered . . ." (v. 43).

The removal of the leprous house is a figure for the deconstruction of the house of Israel (compare, for example, Zechariah 5:4 with Leviticus 14:45), who in manifesting the mind of sin rejected the Lord Jesus Christ and experienced the destruction of A.D. 70. In referring to this passage, the consequence for Israel of their rejection of the gospel is once again highlighted. The lesson, of

course, does not end there, as a similar destruction awaits all those who refuse the Lord Jesus at his coming, when the kingdom of men is broken to pieces and becomes like the chaff of the summer threshing floor.

Conclusion

In reviewing the material, three lessons emerge for our own preaching. Firstly, we must not shake off the dust of our feet before an opportunity to respond has been provided; we should not use our separation as an excuse to refrain from delivering the message of gospel truth. Secondly, the act of shaking off the dust from their feet was aimed primarily at the Jews, who, having knowledge of the Scriptures, failed to appreciate their true import in rejecting the Son of God. The first-century followers of the Lord were required to mark their separation from them; similarly we are required to mark our separation from those who, having an interest in the Bible, fail to recognise the Truth. While we should continue to appeal, we cannot share fellowship with those who refuse the teaching of the Word of God. Finally, as heralds of the King, we are required to make clear what the consequences of ignoring his call will be, not with delight in the predicament of others, but rather in the faithful discharge of our responsibility to act as watchmen against the coming of the King.