

THE HANDS OF THE PASSION¹

Hands of Repentance

In the name of Jesus, the Friend of sinners, dearly redeemed:

Spring Break my Freshman year in college, headed west on I-94 across Wisconsin, I was sleeping – fortunately my friend was driving. Suddenly he slows down, “I wasn’t going that fast was I?” Quickly pulls over as a State Patrolman is on the loud speaker: “Keep your hands where I can see them. You too, passenger! Put your hands on the dashboard.” Two more vehicles with flashing lights pulled up behind him, another in front of us, and a fifth across the median. “Driver, use your left hand to drop the keys out the window. Keep your hands up. Reach out and open the door from the outside. Step out and put your hands on the roof. Now you, passenger, do the same. Reach outside and open the door. Both of you keep your hands on the roof and move to the trunk.” Guns out, a couple officers watched while one checked us for weapons. They checked the trunk, disappointed. When they found out we were both studying for the ministry, they told us the rest of the story. My friend’s car was a gray, four-door Ford with a missing rear hubcap. Exact match to the getaway vehicle of an armed robbery in the next county.

Our hands can mean the difference between life and death. But our hands are connected to our head and heart. So why am I still wondering to this day what flashed across my mind? Surrounded by armed officers, why this? *I wonder what would happen if I ran across the ditch and tried to jump that barbed wire fence.* Fortunately, the police could not hear my thoughts, but God knows every one.

As the Lenten season begins again with Ash Wednesday, do you have memories you don’t understand? Some you do not want to share? Memories that make you wonder why God would have anything to do with you at all?

Because hands are involved in all of our lives, it’s no surprise how many hands figured into our Savior’s suffering and death. Our midweek Lenten theme this year is, “The Hands of the Passion.” Tonight the hands do not belong to Judas or Caiaphas or Peter or Pilate or even Jesus. Instead, we focus on the two men our Lord Jesus describes in the Gospel lesson for Ash Wednesday. The familiar parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is not about what they looked like or how their prayers sounded. Picture their hands. See how their hands connected to the attitude of their hearts. Consider your own life and appreciate what it means to have **Hands of Repentance**.

The temple in Jerusalem was familiar to Jesus’ hearers. Two of the characters are fictional, but very believable. People often went up to the temple to pray. And both men begin their prayers with the same word, “God,” but nothing is the same after that.

The first man is a Pharisee, one of the spiritual elite of Jewish society. Pharisees always claimed the moral high ground, reverence, obedience beyond their fellow Jews. This Pharisee is making sure everyone in the temple knows how good he is. He’s praying, “**God, I thank you . . .**” Beautiful beginning, right? Christian parents teach their children to begin their prayers with thanks. If only the Pharisee had stopped there. “Dear God, I thank you. Amen.” His uplifted hands reveal his sinful heart.

He prays *about* himself, *to* himself – certainly not to God, even though he says, “**God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.**” Hands folded or lifted up to heaven (1 Timothy 2:8), no matter. He’s really giving himself a verbal pat on the

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back. Not a robber – keeps the Seventh Commandment. No adulterer – clean on the Sixth. Wouldn't even think of running from the police. Not that stupid. Keeps all of the commandments – he's sure.

Actually, he thought he had more good in him than that. Pharisee made up extra laws to obey above and beyond what God said. To make sure God noticed, he gave some specific examples. ***“I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”*** The Law of Moses required faithful Jews to fast only one day out of the year. He fasted two days out of every week. The ten percent tithe he never missed.

He sure looked good on the surface. Shining morality, welcome generosity, people looking up to him. But beneath the surface? What's inside his head and heart? Why pray like that? Luke doesn't provide any details about the Pharisee's motivation; we're just guessing. Was he full of himself, blinded by sinful pride, oozing arrogance? Was his proud prayer a mask of insecurity, trying to deflect attention away from all the good things he hadn't done? Maybe trying to convince the other worshipers in the temple of his special relationship with God as much as he was trying to convince himself?

Most worshipers probably didn't notice the other man praying at a distance, chin buried in his chest. So ashamed, clenching his hands into fists, beating his breast. So conscious of all he has done. So sure he deserves God's wrath and punishment. All he can pray is, ***“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”***

The tax collector didn't try to compare himself to the really bad people to make himself look good. He didn't put together a resume of all the good things he had done to make himself look and feel better. Instead he stared at himself honestly in the glaring lighted mirror of God's law. He saw himself for the helpless sinner that he was. He recognized that his only hope was to plead for mercy.

It wasn't a long prayer (only seven words in English), but it was powerful because it was genuine, because it was heartfelt and sincere, totally from a heart of humble faith. And the faith of the tax collector was rewarded when Jesus set the record straight, ***“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”***

Jesus told this story not just to the Pharisees or tax collectors or even his disciples. Luke tells us that Jesus was talking to people ***“who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else.”*** As you look out into that crowd of people, do you see people like that? Maybe a classmate always talking about how great she is or cutting down others to make himself look good. Maybe a coworker constantly telling you how to do your job. Facebook friends whose lives can't be as bright and beautiful as they brag. When you look more closely, see anyone who looks like you?

When we complain about people thinking they're better than us, aren't we actually doing it? When we criticize some who look down on the rest of us, aren't we in a way looking down on them? We'd never stand up in of church to call out another worshiper, but would God see sores of judgmentalism and self-righteousness in our hearts? How can we escape Pharisee prayers of guilt before God?

Look for a third person, the One who told the story. He had every reason to boast because He always honored his parents, fully obeyed the laws of the land, kept every commandment of God perfectly. Not for his own benefit. Not so to boast, but all for you and me. He the only man who ever had a legitimate reason *not* to be humble. Jesus is true God – knows all, sees all, rules all, and yet as the Creator of all things made himself nothing. He took on human flesh to take the role of a servant. To be humiliated, beaten, executed, not to pay for his own sins, because he had no sin. Everything he did, he did for you. In mercy Jesus took your place. In mercy He lived a sinless life in your place and died on the cross in your place, to secure you a place at his side in heaven. In mercy Jesus gives you the gift of prayer to talk to him anywhere, anytime, about anything. He promises only what is best for you, beyond what you can ask or imagine. In mercy Jesus gives you his true body and blood in Holy Communion, His personal assurance of free and full forgiveness all to thoughts and attitudes. In great mercy, your guilt is gone. Nothing to fear, everything to hope for as you leave this house of worship with clean hands. Best of all you are in God's hands. Amen.

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