

Lifting up Holy Hands – connecting to God in worship and prayer

I preached this message about 6 weeks ago at ACC. Now usually I may have a message in my mind for a few weeks before I preach, meditating on it, mulling it around. But this one was interesting because the day before, I had only one verse “*I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting.*” But I knew I could trust the Lord and that he would be faithful to give me something so as I sat down and began putting together verses and thoughts the Lord was faithful to give me this word for today. It is really about connecting with God in worship and prayer. Another verse that mentions lifting hands is:

Ps 134 Praise the LORD, all you servants of the LORD who minister by night in the house of the LORD. 2 Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the LORD. 3 May the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion.

You know, **I really love to worship God**. I often find that connecting with God in worship is an absolute life line to me. Several weeks back we did a Friday night worship, and I had a lot of things on my mind. And as we worshipped I just got down on my knees in prayer and was thinking about the shortness of life. I was thinking about how I am in the second half of my life...getting late in the 3rd quarter even. And I've just got a lot of uncertainty in my life. Still trying to figure out the job situation. My boys are in transitions to their own adult lives. And I am just thinking to myself, how am I going to finish? What does God want me to do with the remaining years he gives me? So I looked up the verse in Psalm 139:16 that says “all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be”. I began reading around the nearby verses and in v15 it says:

v15 My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. 16 Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed.

Then the verse after says: v17 How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How great is the sum of them! 18 If I should count them, they would be more in number than the sand; When I awake, I am still with You.

And this incredible peace came over me as I realized...**God sees me**. He saw me from the beginning and **he thinks about me and my situation constantly!** I wasn't given any specifics about my situation, but I was given this sense of being under the Father's thoughtful gaze. God sees, and is giving thought to me! He's gotten me through so far. Why am I worrying? Now, a couple of months later I have some direction and a fresh opportunity. And it truly has been God orchestrating everything.

I want to talk today about the importance of really connecting to God in prayer and worship.

1 Tim 2:8-9

I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath¹ and doubting²; in like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, 10 but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works.

How would you describe your prayer and worship? When you came in this morning, were you able to lift your hands freely to the Lord?

This passage in Timothy is at the end of a section about prayer. It is one of those passages that gets me thinking, because it says a lot in a couple of short verses. Note – men – it calls on us to be the ones lifting up our hands in prayer. And clearly this speaks of a public not merely a private gathering. It doesn't mean that women shouldn't be raising their hands or praying or worshipping publicly. But men, **we are to lead** in this area and not leave it to the wives to do that stuff.

But what exactly are “holy hands”?

It says men are to lift up “holy hands” and that women are to be adorned with good works. I think these are basically saying the same thing.

We know we are only saved by faith in Jesus. When we place ourselves in Christ through faith and choose to follow him, we receive his righteous reward of right standing with God and eternal life.

But there is an aspect of holiness that comes about from this salvation inside working its way out through our lives. And God notices our good deeds prompted from a sincere heart. I don't mean God can be impressed by our deeds, especially if that is our motive, but when we live holy lives out of a proper fear of God, God notices! Remember the story of Cornelius family (the first gentile believers)?

Acts 10:1 At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. 2 He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. 3 One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!" 4 Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked. The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.

¹ NT:3709 orge (or-gay'); from NT:3713; properly, desire (as a reaching forth or excitement of the mind), i.e. (by analogy,) violent passion (ire, or [justifiable] abhorrence); by implication punishment: KJV - anger, indignation, vengeance, wrath.)

² NT:1261 dialogismos (dee-al-og-is-mos'); from NT:1260; discussion, i.e. (internal) consideration (by implication, purpose), or (external) debate: KJV - dispute, doubtful (-ing), imagination, reasoning, thought.

Isn't that remarkable? This gentile who didn't know the truth of the gospel yet knew enough to fear God and that he should take care of the poor. He prayed regularly and gave generously, and **God noticed**. God chose Cornelius' family as the first gentiles (non-Jews) to receive the new covenant. Such an incredible honor bestowed upon this man and his family.

It makes me think of what God said to Eli. **"Those who honor me, I will honor..."** (1 Sam 2:30)

I think what Paul is asking of us is to raise hands that honor him. Raise hands that belong to a life that brings God public praise and honor.

Again, I want to emphasize that good works don't save us, but those who are saved should be doing good works.

Heb 10:19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. 25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Yes, we enter with confidence before God by his blood. And then we do good works and spur one another on toward good deeds. One of those good works is meeting together on a regular basis. If you are not in church regularly you might also find yourself having a hard time raising holy hands.

So, what about the other conditions?

Without wrath or doubting?

Sometimes, we find it hard to worship God and pray because our thoughts are elsewhere. This is a really interesting verse to me, because the conditions seem really odd. Lift up hands in prayer...

...without wrath

...without doubting (some versions say disputing)

The first part of this I find odd – like, who comes in to pray and raises their hands in anger? But many of us may find ourselves coming from family contention and then into a time of prayer or worship. No emotion side tracks clear thinking and a prayerful frame of mind than anger.

Now the second part of this condition, *without doubting* is something I can relate to. Now this word is used a few different ways in the New Testament.

- It is used to describe how the disciples were “disputing” who was the greatest among them. This is recorded to have occurred some short time after Jesus was transfigured on the mountain with Peter, James, and John. (Jesus gave these 3 a little peak at his glorified state. Bright and radiant, then Moses and Elijah appeared – two superheroes of the faith – then the Father speaks out of the cloud. Quite an experience! So it may have been one of those 3 that started the debate...my money is on James.)
- Some commentators link the two words together “without anger and disputing” meaning that when you come together to pray and worship, we need to do it in a spirit of unity. This is certainly true. If you have strained relationships with any person sitting in the same room it can be hard to focus on the Lord, to pray effectively, to worship with your whole heart. We must deal with our relationship issues as quickly as possible. We cannot let our pride keep us separated.
- Back to the verse about the dispute among the disciples about who was the greatest. Interestingly it says in the next verse that Jesus perceived their thoughts. (Do you know that God knows what you are thinking? Scary right?) And it is the same Greek word...so it has the idea of both an outside dispute as well as internal thoughts and doubts.
- It also is used to describe how the disciples reacted when they first saw Jesus after his resurrection. It says they were terrified and didn’t know what to think. Jesus asks them why they have “doubts” or “thoughts” in their hearts. He says – look at the evidence. Touch me, check out my wounds, see that I am real.

Let’s consider the use of this word referring to doubts and internal struggles.

What kind of doubts or struggles in our minds might keep us from truly connecting with God?

Scripture speaks of numerous areas that can be real hinderances for us and I’m going to go through 5 of them.

1. Holding on to your sin

Ps 66:16 Come and listen, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me.

17 I cried out to him with my mouth; his praise was on my tongue.

18 If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened;

19 but God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer.

If you have a guilty conscience and know you need to repent, but you are not willing to repent...forget it. But wait...we enter with confidence through the Blood of Christ, right? Yes. But the relational aspect of connecting with God and communicating with him is hindered when we are holding onto our sin. **Prayer usually works not by changing God’s mind, but by God changing us.** When we hold onto sin, we aren’t surrendered to him. We aren’t open to his thoughts or prompting.

It could be like James 4:3 which says “And when you do ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may squander it on your pleasures.”

Or perhaps in your marriage like it says in 1 Peter 3:7 “Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.”

The idea there is that your prayers just don’t make it out of the building. How do you overcome this so that you can pray and worship and connect with the living God? Repent and change how you relate to your wife.

2. Double-mindedness

James 4:8 Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

Double-mindedness means Jesus really isn’t first. What is most important to you? Is it your job? Or your spouse? Here’s a way to check: what are your first and last thoughts of each day?

3. Giving God your leftovers

Mal 1:14 “Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord. For I am a great king,” says the LORD Almighty, “and my name is to be feared among the nations.

Don’t cheat God by giving him your leftovers. This is a harsh verse but sometimes we may start out with the best of intentions but then substitute something less in the end. We justify it because we’re so busy and distracted and whatever. But to give our great king, the Lord Almighty anything less than our very best is to cheat God.

We’re told to give God our “first fruits”. The top of the pile, not what’s left over after we’ve paid everyone else. This is why I think tithing is so important. It is not a legalistic obligation but rather a principle of the heart. I am giving God the first 10% (based on gross income). We need to do the same thing with our time. Scheduling in time to pray, read our bible, serve, and worship. Not just when we feel like or have time, but let it be a priority in your life.

4. Ritual without Reality

You know I love the prophets. So direct and to the heart of the matter. In Isaiah God shows what he thinks about empty religion, ritual without reality. God says:

Isa 1:14 Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. 15 When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not

listen. Your hands are full of blood; 16 wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, 17 learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. 18 "Come now, let us reason together, "says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.

Isaiah comes back to this theme later in chapter 58 in which he talks about what it means to truly fast.

Isa 58:5 Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

The prophet goes through what false and true worship and fasting looks like.

Israelites Fast	True Fast
One day to humble oneself (v5)	Breaking injustice (v6)
Symbolic rituals	Share food/clothes/shelter with the hungry/naked/wanderer (v7)
Strife	Care for your own family (v7)
Injustice	No malicious talk or slander
Doing as you please	Spend yourself to satisfy the needs of the oppressed (10)
Requests NOT heard by God (v4)	The Lord will answer

When our prayer and worship leads us to caring for the world:

God promises to respond to such a “fast”

- He will make us shine like the sun, a light in the darkness.
- He will be our guide
- He will make us a well-watered garden
- And a spring whose waters never fail

Gods people accomplish great things if we stand up for true justice

- Repair broken walls
- Restore streets with dwellings

I think this is an area the church needs true revival. Getting out from the normal church routine and spending ourselves breaking injustice and caring for the needy. For example, the issue of human trafficking is a great evil in our time. One of the drivers of that is the pornography industry. Something the church needs to do is purge itself of our addictions to pornography. It is a trap of the enemy that up to 75% of the men and 25% of the women in the typical church struggle with. I’ve chronicled my own struggles with this before. And I’ll be honest, I still rely on things like internet accountability to keep me from jumping back into that sin. It is pervasive

in our society and a terribly addictive sin. The church needs to be a place where we can talk openly about it and help people overcome this entangling and destructive sin.

If anyone of you want to talk to me about this, just text me or call me and we can discuss it privately. **Finally, hinderance number 5.**

5. Sometimes our own hearts are confused

1 John 3:16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. 17 If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. 19 This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence 20 whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

In other words – if you ever doubt in your own hearts whether you are right before God, look at how you are living. What do your actions show? How are you spending your time and money? Are you living a life that exemplifies the love of God?

Remember when Peter denied Jesus and later Jesus asks Peter 3 times, “do you love me?”. The third time, Peter says “Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you.” If our own hearts and minds say “God doesn’t hear you. You are a sinner. You know what you did.” We appeal back to God and say, “God, look at my life, you know that I love you.

Again – this comes back to Paul’s instruction for men to lift up holy hands and for women to adorn themselves with good works.

1. If you are holding onto sin, repent. If you are not treating your wife right, repent.
2. If you are not whole-hearted toward God – surrender everything to him.
3. If you are giving God what is leftover after giving to everyone else, switch the order and start giving to God your first and best.
4. If your worship is just ritual, and not changing who you are or what you do outside of the church walls, ask God how you can begin to really do the things that are important to God’s heart.
5. If your own heart is condemning you – look at your hands and your clothing. Are your hands holy? Busy doing good? Ladies, are you adorned this morning with good works? If so appeal back to God to vindicate you.

In closing – **there is nothing more powerful in your life than the real connection between you and God by the power of the Holy Spirit.** When you have that connection, you can make it through any circumstance, overcome any obstacle, and finish the race of life according to the plans God already has for you.

Raise your holy hands in prayer.