

*I desire then that in every place the men should pray,
lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling ~ I Timothy 2:8*

When I pastored in Statesboro, Georgia, one Sunday evening a month I went into the local prison to preach. How I ended up doing that is a long story – let me just say that it is the only time in my career when I proactively offered to preach somewhere without first being invited. I count it as one of the most valuable things I have ever done in ministry and owe much to those hot, crowded services in that dingy prison recreation room.

I remember a lot of things from those services. I remember the songs the inmates used to write and sing, including my favorite: “Trouble won’t last – God’s got your back.” I remember the tacky, lovely Pentecostal couple who gave themselves to the inmates every Sunday, loving those brothers in ways that I could only hope to palely imitate. I remember the young guest preacher who stripped down to his gym shorts to try to show that he was no better than the inmates (true story; see argument # 87 for the Regulative Principle of Worship). I remember some of the skeptical inmates sitting in the back laughing at me as I preached. But most of all, I remember the faith of the believing inmates – the hunger they had for God’s Word and the pure joy and gratitude with which they received it. They needed to hear the Gospel of God’s grace each time, and they let me know it. You could see it on their faces.

But another thing I will never forget is the simple ritual we would go through before each service began. As the inmates filed in, those of us leading the service would greet them with “the right hand of Christian fellowship.” It was a receiving line of sorts, and it became very important to the inmates that we greeted them this way. I remember feeling engulfed by their large, calloused hands. It was a work-prison, and their hands showed it. And I remember wondering about the crimes each of those hands had done to earn them this place. Oh, I would not be surprised if a few in that prison were wrongly convicted, but the Christians there openly admitted their crimes and said that they deserved to be there and knew that God had them there for a reason. And so each time I preached the Gospel in that prison, I would first take into my hands the hands of others that I knew had committed dreadful crimes and sins.

In Paul’s first letter to Timothy, Paul writes, “I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling.” Have you thought about what this means? It is easy to skip over, since right afterwards Paul goes into the role of women in the church, a passage rightly needing keen attention in our day. But before all that, he gives positive instruction as to what the men are to do.

We have good reason to think that Paul has in mind here ordained men in public worship, and that for two reasons. First, because the passages which follow are about the role of men, women and officers in the Church, which Paul calls “the household of God” (I Tim. 3:15). But second, because in the Old Testament, whenever we read of men lifting their hands in prayer, it was almost always leaders in Israel. See for instance Exodus 9:29; I Kings 8:22; Psalm 28:2; 63:4; 134:2; 141:2; and Isaiah 1:15. This lifting of hands is more than just folks getting excited during a praise song. I Timothy 2:8 is a prescription of how ordained men are to lead their churches.

So how? How are we to lead the church? First, with prayer. By turning our hands upward to God, empty; calling on His strength, His work, His salvation. Second, in such a way that leads to peace – it is to be without anger or quarreling. Why should we be angry? God has fully paid for all our sins and will take vengeance in His time on whatever enemies we have left. As much as it possible with us we should be at peace with all men. And why should we quarrel? Our sins are forgiven and so are those of everyone else who is in Christ. So the only thing we have left to fight for is the truth of the Gospel, while continuing to wage war against our own sin and disbelief.

But what interests me most is how Paul calls these hands, “holy.” Holy. Think on that. We are to lift up holy hands. How is that possible? Is it possible that Paul means hands made holy by our own sanctification? That we have done enough good things that we would want to present our palms to God as worthy of His blessing? Do any of you wish to approach God like that?

Brothers, stop right now and look at your hands. No, I mean really stop, and look at them. Those hands right in front of you have committed many sins. Oh, I know sin involves our thoughts and eyes, our tongues and our feet. But many of our sins come by our hands. Those same hands which Paul calls holy. What sins have your hands been party to? What item did they take, what page did they turn, what word did they write, what mouse button did they push? What child have they shoved, what face have they slapped? Don’t disown them. They are your sins. Your hands.

And yet Paul dares to call them holy, and bids us lift them up before God’s people to pray. How can we do so? You know the answer. Because of the Gospel. Because our hands have been dipped in the blood of Jesus and are washed clean by His cross, His holiness. Because the baptismal waters which were poured over our heads drips also onto our hands, giving us the sure promise of God’s forgiveness, if we would but believe it. If we would but first hold our hands up, empty, devoid of merit, and thus receive the full pardon and blessing of God which is ours in Christ.

Now, think back with me to that crowded, hot dingy prison as I shook the sinful hands of all those inmates, remembering how they needed the Gospel. Brothers, it is no different with our people. Each of them comes to worship with sinful hands, needing the cleansing promise of Christ. And you of all people are the one God has chosen to bring it to them. You, with your own sinful hands.

And yet hands now made holy by the Gospel.

Do you not know how God blesses your people through your hands? Each time you lift them up to pray? Each time you wave them around in the pulpit? Each time you break the bread, or lift the cup, or pour the water upon a new head? Each time you raise them to bless and send God’s people off in peace? Each time you shake a hand or pat a shoulder. It is through you and your hands that God is now working by His Holy Spirit. And we dare not call profane that which God has called holy.

Can you do your job? Can you love your people anew and bring them the Gospel each week? What else is it that you think you are supposed to do? They need this Gospel. They need it just as much as any prisoner ever did. And it comes, in part, through your hands, in themselves sinful but yet made holy by God’s grace. Brothers, lift up your holy hands in prayer, and lead God’s people in that grace.