

# Hands of Vindication

**Matthew 27:15-26** <sup>15</sup> Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to releasing to the multitude one prisoner whom they wished. <sup>16</sup> And at that time they had a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. <sup>17</sup> Therefore, when they had gathered together, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release to you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" <sup>18</sup> For he knew that they had handed Him over because of envy. <sup>19</sup> While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, "Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him." <sup>20</sup> But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. <sup>21</sup> The governor answered and said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" They said, "Barabbas!" <sup>22</sup> Pilate said to them, "What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" *They* all said to him, "Let Him be crucified!" <sup>23</sup> Then the governor said, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they cried out all the more, saying, "Let Him be crucified!" <sup>24</sup> When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather *that* a tumult was rising, he took water and washed *his* hands before the multitude, saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see *to it*." <sup>25</sup> And all the people answered and said, "His blood *be* on us and on our children." <sup>26</sup> Then he released Barabbas to them; and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered *Him* to be crucified.

In an attempt to absolve himself of the guilt of what he knows full well to be the murder of an innocent man Pilate washes his hands before the crowd of people and claims, "I am innocent." As far as grand symbolic gestures go this one is terrible. As if washing your hands with water would ever be sufficient to cleanse you from the guilt of the murder of an innocent man.

And yet as foolish as this gesture is, it is exactly the kind of thing we humans have been doing from the very beginning. We are guilty of sin and we know it. Yet instead of confession our sins, we keep trying blatantly worthless attempts to remove ourselves from that guilt.

Adam and Eve tried to hide from God. Maybe if he can't find us we won't get in trouble. Then they started blaming each other.

Pilate's mistake was using water. There is another substance that would have worked. If he had instead washed his hands in the blood of the very man he was condemning, that would have removed his sin and made him innocent. It was for that very reason that Jesus came to die.

Like Pilate we often try to use our hands to cleanse ourselves of sins. Perhaps because it is so often our hands doing the sinning it is equally often our hands with which we attempt to vindicate ourselves. For example we often point at others, hoping we can shift the blame. Or at least make sure the everyone knows they are worst than we are. If we can't remove the blame completely, we can possibly lessen it in comparison.

King Saul was very skilled in pointing the finger at others. One time King Saul had his army ready to go into battle. God told him to wait until Samuel came to offer the sacrifice. Instead of waiting for Samuel Saul offered the sacrifice himself. When Samuel arrived and condemned Saul for what he had done, Saul said that it was Samuel's fault for not arriving soon enough. That excuse did not work with God. God promised Saul on that day that the kingdom would be taken away from Him because of what he had done.

Sometimes we are so arrogant we even point the finger at God.

In the book of Ezekiel the people of Israel complain "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, And the children's teeth are set on edge '?" What they are saying is that it is not fair that their parents are the ones who sinned, but that God is punishing them.

God's response is basically, "You think I don't know who has done what? You think I don't know who is innocent and who is guilty?"

This part of Ezekiel reminds me quite a bit of when we kids would try to tell our mother our version of the story and she would respond that she knew quite well what happened she heard the whole thing. We might try to make it look like our brother was really the one at fault but it didn't work with Mom and it certainly isn't going to work with God.

There is however one place where we can point our fingers, and that is at the cross of Christ. Jesus is the scapegoat. The one person we can point to and he will accept all our sins. Even as John the Baptist did.

**John 1:29 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!**

Wouldn't it be great if when you were little you could blame your brother and your brother would back you up. Jesus is our brother who does accept our blame and carry our punishment.

Another way in which we try to use our hands to vindicate ourselves is by working hard, thinking that if I do enough good with these hands I can make up for the sin which I have done.

But doing good tomorrow does not make up for sins today. If I steal from one but give to another, the giving does not balance out the stealing. The good which we do is what we should be doing anyway. We

cannot claim it as extra work to credit against our sin. If we are supposed to clean our room and do our homework, we cannot claim cleaning our room as an excuse not to do our homework.

The Jews tried just such an excuse with Jesus. Even if we have not done everything right, they said, look how good we are at tithing. Jesus responded, **“These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.” Matthew 23:23**

Years ago, before people had nice safe electrical lights to put up on a Christmas tree they would actually put candles on the trees. As you can imagine having candles light on the branches of a dead tree is not the safest thing in the world. There is the story about one family where the tree catches fire and a boy grabs the burning tree and pulls it out of the house. Needless to say his hand was badly burnt. The whole family praised the boy and said what a hero he was, except the grandma. The grandma knew what the boy had done the week before. She knew that he thought grabbing the tree was repayment for his sin, but of course it was not.

Every good deed that we could possibly do in this life is merely a deed which we should have done anyway, and therefore can not be used as payment for the many sins which we also do. The work of our hands can not remove the stain of our sin.

But the work of Christ’s hands is sufficient. He had no need to fulfill the law or even to be born as a human. Everything he did was above and beyond and is therefore capable of being the payment for our sins.

**Galatians 4:4-5 God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, <sup>5</sup> to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.**

A third self-justifying hand gesture is when we throw our hands up in the air in denial. It was not me. I did not do it. There was that Superbowl commercial this year based on that shaggy song, “wasn’t me.”

Keep denying it and hope they do not have any proof. It is a tactic that seems to work well in our criminal justice system. It is a tactic that many spouses use with one another. But even in the commercial shaggy comments, “that’s the first time that has ever worked.”

It a tactic that many people use with God. Well, he hasn’t punished me yet, either he doesn’t know, or he doesn’t care. But it does not work. Peter reminds us:

**2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slack concerning *His* promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.**

It is a tactic that may seem to work for a little while but always ends up catching up to you. Yes, if we deny we can pretend it didn’t happen for a little while. But when we confess our sins, we can receive forgiveness and move on with our lives.

Our hands can not vindicate us regardless of how much we wash, point, work, or deny. But the hands of Christ can. They are hands that wash us in his blood. They are hands that point us to his cross. They are hands that labored under the law in our place. They are hands there were raised on the cross. They were pierced for our justification. His hands and his hands alone can wash away our sin.

Amen