

## Lifting Up Holy Hands

What was once primarily a charismatic practice is now becoming more wide spread among evangelical Christians: that is, the raising of hands while praying or singing during worship services. Those who do it believe they are obeying Scripture, for they read in 1 Timothy 2:8, *I will therefore that men pray every where, **lifting up holy hands**, without wrath and doubting.* Certainly, we do not want to cast doubt upon the sincerity of Christians who are trying to be intense in their worship of God by raising their hands. We do, though, want to have a right understanding about the things God has said. If God meant for us to raise our hands in the air while praying, why do so many of us not do so? Are we too lazy? Do we lack the feeling that charismatic worshipers possess? Are we missing out on something God wants us to experience? Or, could it be that God did not use those words in a literal sense and really meant for us to understand them in a figurative sense? Could this phrase, *lifting up holy hands*, be an idiom?

An idiom is a statement which is not intended to be literal, but to represent a peculiar concept. For example, when we want to describe how nervous a person is before a big performance, we say he has “butterflies in his stomach.” We do not mean by this that he has real physical butterflies flitting around inside his body. We are only drawing a comparison between the nervous sensation he is feeling and the erratic activity of those little animals. In this way, “butterflies in the stomach” serves as an idiom, that is, a statement not intended to be understood literally, but to describe a peculiar concept.

There are many idioms in our English language. Someone who is said to have a green thumb does not really have a thumb colored green. A green thumb is an idiom referring to someone who has a talent for gardening and an ability to make things grow. Similarly, to say someone has “cold feet” means he is nervous and hesitant to proceed. To be an “eager beaver” is to always be ready to work or do something extra. To “hit the bull’s eye” is to make the point of your argument. To be “dressed to kill” is to wear one’s finest clothes. None of these idioms are intended to be understood literally and everyone familiar with the English language understands the figurative implications when such statements are used.

Other languages also use idiomatic statements and the language of Scripture is no exception. When David said in Psalm 6:6, *all the night make I my bed to swim*, was he saying that his bed was doing the back stroke in the palace swimming pool? Of course not. He used the phrase as an idiom to describe the abundance of his tears. Or, how about when Jesus said, *neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet* (Matthew 7:6)? Was he advising women against throwing their pearl necklaces in a pig pen where they would get squished into the mud? Obviously not. He used the statement as an idiom to show us how unprofitable it is to give the truth to those who have no interest in receiving it.

Among the many idioms that can be found in Scripture is this one, “*Lifting up holy hands.*” In telling us to lift up holy hands in prayer (1 Timothy 2:8), God did not have the physical gesture in mind at all. He used the statement as an idiom to represent the quality of a man’s behavior. In fact, God’s idiomatic use of hands in Scripture can be substantially demonstrated. And the lifting up of **holy** hands teaches a particular spiritual principle that all

believers should practice.

### God's Idiomatic Use of Hands In Scripture

Some will argue that physical gestures like the raising of hands in worship were literal in the Old Testament and serve as an example for how we should worship in the New Testament era. In doing so they will refer to such verses as Psalm 134:2 which says, *Lift up your hands in the sanctuary, and bless the LORD*. On the one hand, it is possible that Old Testament references to lifting up the hands in worship were also idiomatic. On the other hand, the fact that Old Testament saints may have used certain physical gestures in worshiping God is not in and of itself a sufficient argument for New Testament believers to do the same thing. Many of the physical activities of the Old Testament served as pictures for spiritual activity in the New Testament. For example, in the Old Testament, unleavened cakes mingled with oil were offered to God as a sacrifice of thanksgiving (Leviticus 7:11-13). But in the New Testament, the fruit of our lips [itself an idiomatic statement since our lips do not actually bear fruit like apples or oranges] accomplishes exactly the same thing.

Hands are used idiomatically throughout Scripture to represent the activities of a man's life. For example, Psalm 24:4 refers to *clean hands and a pure heart*. We easily understand that the word heart in this verse does not refer to the physical organ of the human body, but to the inner man, the person housed in the body. Used here in conjunction with a pure heart, we should also be able to see the idiomatic nature of the term clean hands as referring to outward man, and the things he does with his body. Thus, "clean hands" does not refer to physical hands that have been washed with soap and water, but to the sanctified way in which a man has lived his life.

In 2 Samuel 18:28, Ahimaaz brought news concerning Joab's victory over Absalom. In his report he said, *Blessed be the LORD thy God, which hath delivered up the men that **lifted up their hand** against my lord the king*. Absalom and the men who followed him did so much more than simply raise their hands in the air as a gesture of defiance against David. The phrase *lifted up their hand* was used idiomatically by Ahimaaz to describe the total movement of rebellion against the king.

In the book of Lamentations, Jeremiah described the great distress experienced by the remnant left in Jerusalem after it was decimated by Nebuchadnezzar. He also directed this little group to finally do what the nation had failed to do up to the very end: turn back to God with sincere repentance. His words were: *Let us lift up our heart with our hands unto God in the heavens* (Lamentations 3:41). Could anyone really think that he was suggesting a person should remove his physical heart and lift it up to heaven with his physical hands? Of course not. This statement is obviously idiomatic both for the word heart and the word hands. To lift up our heart with our hands unto God in the heavens is to show God the genuineness of our repentance by a change in the behavior of our lives.

Thus in Scripture, as the heart often represents the inward man, the hands often represent the outward man. As in Proverbs 23:7, Solomon said, *For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he...*, referring to the character of a man's soul, so in Ecclesiastes 2:11 he said, *Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought...* referring to the activities of a man's life. Of course, much of the physical activity of a person involves the use of his hands, whether in

writing, or eating, or using tools, or a thousand other things. The hands are thus the logical part of a man's body to be used as an idiom in referring to his behavior.

### **God's Use of Hands In Making Spiritual Applications**

The Bible is consistent in using the terms heart and hands when evaluating a man's life. The heart represents the internal part and the hands represent the external part. Genesis 20:5 says, *Said he not unto me, She is my sister? and she, even she herself said, He is my brother: in the integrity of my heart and innocency of my hands have I done this.* Abimelech offered this statement as a defense for nearly taking Sarah to be his wife. The integrity of his heart described the motive of his inner man and the innocency of his hands described the actual deed. Abimelech used these two idioms together to say that both in motive and deed he was guiltless in his conduct toward Sarah.

This perfectly illustrates how the hands are used throughout Scripture to evaluate the activities of a person's life. The following list of Scripture verses gives additional evidence that this is so.

#### Regarding evil or irresponsible activity:

Deuteronomy 31:29 - *...because ye will do evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke him to anger through the work of your hands.*

Psalms 7:3 - *O LORD my God, if I have done this; if there be iniquity in my hands....*

Psalms 9:16 - *...the wicked is snared in the work of his own hands.*

Psalms 26:10 - *In whose hands is mischief, and their right hand is full of bribes.*

Proverbs 6:10 - *Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep....*

Proverbs 21:25 - *The desire of the slothful killeth him; for his hands refuse to labour.*

Ecclesiastes 10:18 - *By much slothfulness the building decayeth; and through idleness of the hands the house droppeth through.*

Isaiah 59:3 - *For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity....*

Mark 9:43 - *And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off:...*

#### Regarding good or responsible activity:

2 Samuel 22:21 - *The LORD rewarded me according to my righteousness: according to the cleanness of my hands hath he recompensed me.*

1 Chronicles 12:17 - *...seeing there is no wrong in my hands....*

Job 16:17 - *Not for any injustice in my hands: also my prayer is pure.*

Job 17:9 - *...the righteous also shall hold on his way, and he that hath clean hands shall be stronger and stronger.*

Job 22:30 - *He shall deliver the island of the innocent: and it is delivered by the pureness of thine hands.*

Psalms 18:20 - *...the LORD rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands hath he recompensed me.*

Psalms 18:24 - *Therefore hath the LORD recompensed me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands in his eyesight.*

Proverbs 31:31 - *Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates.*

### **The Idiom of *Lifting Up Holy Hands***

Following a consistent practice in Scripture, God uses the phrase *lifting up holy hands* as an idiom in order to teach a spiritual principle. He uses these words to say that a man's prayers to God should be preceded by holy living. God, after all, is a holy God, and those who approach Him in prayer and worship should

do so worthily: in a manner that shows respect and honor for the nature and character of His Divine Person.

In Isaiah chapter one, God confronted the nation of Israel for the impurity of their worship. In verse 13 He called their oblations vain, their incense an abomination and their solemn meetings on the Sabbath iniquity. But their worship was filthy only because their lives were corrupt. In verse 4 He said, *A sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward.* The only way their worship could be pure was for their lives to be clean. So, in verse 16 He says, *Wash you, make you clean: put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes....*

In the Old Testament, God put a great emphasis on cleansing in preparation for worship activities. In Numbers chapter 8, He gave instruction to the Levites regarding this. In verse 6 He said, *Take the Levites from among the children of Israel, and cleanse them.* He explains in the chapter that this is necessary because the Levites have been set apart *to do the service of the children of Israel in the tabernacle of the congregation* (verse 19). No one who had not been properly cleansed would be allowed to participate in this service. Approaching the holy God was and is serious business and must not be attempted without appropriate preparation.

This same concept of cleansing in preparation for worship is carried over into the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 11:17-31, Paul confronted local church members for failing to properly prepare themselves for the observance of the Lord's Table. He said in verse 29, *For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.* He then suggested that some of them were experiencing physical infirmities,

even physical death, because of their failure to be properly prepared before approaching God in worship. He said in verse 28, *Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup.* And in verse 31 he said, *For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged.* In other words, a time of self examination and confession of sins is a prerequisite to acceptable worship because God wants those who approach Him to be clean.

It is for this reason that He said in 1 Timothy 2:8, that He wants people to *lift up holy hands* when they pray to Him, with more emphasis on the word holy than on the word hands. He wants people to present a clean life to Him when they intercede for others and make their requests known to Him. To approach God any other way seriously jeopardizes the chances God will respond affirmatively. As James 1:6-7 says, *But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord.* God told the Israelites virtually the same thing in Isaiah 1:15: *And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood.*

### Conclusion

Think about this logically for a moment. A person meanders through life during the week, moderately living by biblical principles, working a little, playing a little, but not really setting the world on fire by his faith. In fact, occasionally he commits a little sin and causes his unsaved acquaintances to wonder about the genuineness of his profession. Then on Sunday he goes to church. He is greatly moved by the music and the excitement created in the worship setting. As the songs begin to affect his mood, he becomes very sentimental about God. He raises his hands above his head, closes his eyes, and slightly sways his body back and forth, feeling very spiritual because of the experience. In such a situation, has the raising of the worshipers hands really enhanced his approach to God, and has he gained any advantage that he would not have been able to secure without this physical gesture? Is God worshiped more effectively by raised hands than if the hands are not raised? After all of God's rebuke to Israel for showy worship without substance (Isaiah 58, for example) are we to believe that He is pleased with such sentimental exercises while little attention is given to sanctification in the worshiper's daily life?

A reverent posture in worship is certainly advisable. But even if we were to concede that raising the hands in worship was appropriate, there is another way that it can be done besides the charismatic model. By bending the arms at the elbows, a person can raise his hands to his chest and fold them together. With hands raised in this manner and with his head bowed, a person can assume a very reverent, respectful, and biblical worship posture. For all through the Bible, you find true worshipers bowed, fallen prostrate, and humbly subdued when in the presence of the Almighty. No where do you see them swooning sentimentally to visceral music.

But without a clean life to present to the Lord, no posture of the body is of any consequence to Him. Certainly, He Wants people to pray to Him. Certainly, He wants people to worship Him. But when they do, He wants them to seriously consider the divine majesty of the One they are approaching and to present themselves worthily. So He says, *I will that men every where pray.* But when they do, remind them to lift up holy hands. I want to see hands that are without wrath: that is; a life that is without violence and anger and offensive behavior. I want to see hands that are without doubting: that is, a life that is characterized by a vibrant faith and

unwavering trust. I want people to pray to Me who have prepared themselves with holy living, showing by the daily conduct of their lives that they know and respect who I am.

So when you pray, lift your life up to God, not just empty hands. Let Him see how you have prepared yourself to meet with Him in holy communion. In doing so you may enter into a fellowship that is filled with joy and rejoicing because there is harmony between your spirit and God's. How could it be that God would desire any less? How could it be that we would want to give God any less? How could it possibly be that God would be satisfied with a few sentimental physical gestures? We ought to know that His interest in us goes much deeper than that.