

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF END TIME - LAST JUDGMENT

Washing the Blood Off Our Hands

Isaiah 1:10-18 (NIV)

¹⁰ Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah! ¹¹ "The multitude of your sacrifices— what are they to me?" says the LORD. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. ¹² When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? ¹³ Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations— I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. ¹⁴ Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. ¹⁵ When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. 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. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow. ¹⁸ "Come now, let us settle the matter," 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."

The movie *Gladiator* opens with an epic battle between Roman soldiers and German barbarians. That evening while celebrating the Roman victory, one of the commanders asks where the main character, Maximus (played Russel Crowe), will go: back to the barracks or to Rome? Maximus says, "Home. The wife, the son, the harvest." To which another commander says, "Maximus the Farmer. I still have difficulty imaging that." Maximus retorts, "You know, dirt cleans off a lot easier than blood." It's almost a throwaway line, but it's so true. When you get blood on your hands and you don't wash it off immediately, it stains your skin; it doesn't just wash off like dirt. You have to scrub really hard, and even after that you might have to wait for the blood stain to fade.

"Your hands are full of blood!" (verse 15c) This was the charge that the LORD brought against the Israelites of Isaiah's day. It wasn't blood from a battle. It was blood standing in as a visual representation of their sin. The LORD was calling the Israelites out on the fact that they gave him lip service as they brought offerings as required by the law of the LORD, but their hearts were far from him. Their other sins are not exactly listed in this section of Isaiah's prophecy, but they're bad enough for the LORD to liken them to the heinous and perverse sins of Sodom and Gomorrah. Maybe they were sexual sins. Maybe they were sins of mistreating others, keeping the poor poorer, scheming to take financial advantage of widows and orphans. Whatever their sins were, it was clear that they gave the appearance of being faithful to God, but their hearts and their actions to other people showed that they were anything but faithful to God.

This is how the LORD comes to say, "The multitude of your sacrifices— what are they to me? ... Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations— I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. Your hands are full of blood!" (verse 11a, 13-15)

Do you have blood on your hands?

This coming Wednesday we celebrate another Veterans Day. We have well over 30 people in our congregation who are veterans, many of whom have toured in hostile territories, some who have been in war zones and fought in them. I know enough to not ask veterans if they've killed anyone. So, I haven't. I don't know if any of the veterans listening today have. Maybe you have. Maybe you think about blood being on your hands, that even though you did your faithful duty to your country, to its citizens, that you defended the oppressed and worked to make the world a little bit safer, there is still a pang of guilty, a feeling that your hands are full of blood and it is just not washing off, the thoughts not going away. Does your conscience bother you, wondering if you did the right thing? When the LORD says, "Your hands are full of blood!" (verse 15c), do you think that he's calling you out? Do you wonder if God can forgive you and give you clean hands and a pure heart?

Military or not, we all have hands full of blood because that blood is our sins. We don't have to take a life to have blood on our hands. We get blood on our hands when we hit someone, when a brother strikes his brother and starts a war between them. We get blood on our hands when we abuse someone, raising a hand against our spouse or son or daughter. We get blood on our hands even without raising a fist. God in his Word tells us that anyone who hates his brother or sister is a murderer. Who of us can claim that we

haven't ever hated anyone? We have started wars of hatred and broken the peace among us. When we turn a blind eye to people who are oppressed, put down, taken advantage of, we are also guilty. Like the Israelites of Isaiah's day, our hands are full of blood!

Does God look at us like those Israelites that we are here just giving him lip service while we continue to coat our hands in the blood of others, by sinning against God and against others again and again? Are we like animals trampling his house? Is the LORD weary of us, can't stand our mindless worship of him, and so he hides his eyes from our prayers?

We need our hands cleansed because of what we did, of our abuse, our hatred, and our neglect of others. Try as we might, there is nothing that we can do that will scrub off all of the blood of sin on our hands. How will we ever get clean?

"Come now, let us settle the matter," 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." (verse 18) God has taken us, every single one of us, veteran and non, and he has made us clean. He did this by giving his life in substitution of ours. He sacrificed his life to clean our hands. "The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." (1 John 1:7b) The ultimate soldier sacrificed his life so that we are now clean, the crimson of the blood of sin is gone. His perfect blood washes our hands and gets rid of the blood stain of sin. Our hands are white and pure, even better than washing your hands for 20 seconds.

For our veterans, if you ever have a moment when your conscience bothers you, when you wonder whether or not you did the right thing, that you still feel like you have blood on your hands that doesn't come off, God has settled the matter. There's no more discussion or debate on the topic. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they [are] as white as snow." (verse 18b) Your hands are clean before God. Hold the cross of Christ, hold your baptism up against your conscience. No matter what it says, God says you are clean. So, go forward and proudly serve our Lord by serving our country. Be proud of the faithful service that God enabled you to do. You are clean before him.

For our non-veterans, you have the same cleansing from God. While you may have the guilt of your violence against someone else – hitting your brother, raising your hand to your spouse or your children, hatred in your heart, neglect of those in need – you too have your hands washed clean by the blood of the Lamb, a cleansing given to us in our baptisms. You are clean. You are new. You are covered with Jesus' perfection. He killed your sin. He will never dredge it up against you.

For all of us, having our hands washed clean, we listen again to the instruction of our LORD. "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow." (verse 17)

How can we do these things? Well, maybe we start by pulling back that urge to punch our brother or sister when they make us mad. If we can't seem to stop hating someone, then we come back to the cross every single day. We remember that despite all my sins, he paid the price so that the anger against our sins is resolved forever. Since God has forgiven me this way and loved me so much while I lived with hands full of bloody sin, how can I hate someone when my Lord loves me so much? Are we tending to the needs of others, looking out for their interests? Are there veterans that you know who need help? What are their needs? How can we meet them? Do you have friends or neighbors that you see are neglected? Can you help them? If you don't see any of these things in your life, is there a charity or a cause that you can rally behind in order to help those who are neglected, those who are oppressed?

If we are guilty of abusing someone, it's time to get help. Maybe the place to start is with the National Domestic Violence Hotline or with the local group Safe Harbor, to call them and get help to stop the abuse. Our national church body has recently started a program to help victims of abuse called "Freedom for the Captives," another place to work to end abuse and to recover and find healing from it. Another group called Kingdom Workers, which is connected to our church body, also has started a program to assist congregations to work with survivors of abuse. Is this something we need here for us and for the people of our community? Let's do what is right and just and start the healing process.

Veterans and non-veterans alike, today the matter has been settled. Though our sins were like scarlet blood on our hands, they are now as white as now. We were washed in the blood of the Lamb, in the blood of Jesus. Our hands have been purified better than by what a bottle of Purell would do. We are clean. There is no more blood on our hands. Now we seek to do what is right to others because we love our Lord who has cleansed our hands. Amen.