

TITLE: "Etched on God's Hands"

TEXT: Matthew 7:21, 24-27 (NT p. 7)

Introduction – Leaving God out of the equation

When our son John was home this past Christmas, he visited a bookstore in Ithaca. There are a LOT of bookstores in Ithaca. Another minister told me that Ithaca is unique because it is the only college town she had ever been to, or even HEARD of, that had more bookstores than bars. When I asked her how she knew THAT, she blushed, and said she had looked in the Yellow Pages.

Anyway, John went into this bookstore and there was a sign on the wall behind the register that read "Love and do what you want." John said to the woman behind the counter, "You know, that's a misquote. The original was by St. Augustine and it goes "Love GOD and do what you want." The clerk just shrugged her shoulders.

That is the problem with much of the world today, people are trying to live, to work and to love without God ...and it can't be done.

1. Must be DOERS of God's will

I conducted a memorial service yesterday in Anabel Taylor Chapel at Cornell. John B. Hill, had died earlier this spring at the age of 60. John was not a religious man nor were many of those who attended. I said that that was a GOOD thing because God did not like religion. It's true. Those who think that going through certain rituals, for their own sake, pleases God, are mistaken.

God goes out of the WAY to point out that ritual without love and compassion is meaningless. In Micah 6:6-8 we read:

⁶With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,
with calves a year old?

⁷Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,

with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
 Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
 the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
⁸[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good;
 and what does the LORD require of you
 but to do justice, and to love kindness,
 and to walk humbly with your God?

In a couple weeks I am participating in a wedding and the couple chose these words from Jesus for the service (Matthew 7:21, 24-27):

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but ONLY the one who DOES the will of my Father in heaven. ...Everyone then who hears these words of mine and ACTS on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

The Rock is Jesus Christ. Jesus is not just an historic figure who can be followed or not according to our own whims. The whole UNIVERSE came into being through Jesus. The name of Jesus is not written into the pages of history, it is PLOWED into the very soil from which history is written. Jesus is NOT a way among many, Jesus is THE Way, THE truth and THE life and without Jesus people lose the way and they lose the truth and lose life, life that goes on forever.

2. What do we do?

So, God is not impressed with religion, with empty rituals. God is most concerned with DOING, doing what God wants us to do. And what DOES God want us to do?

[One day] a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ ²⁶[Jesus] said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ ²⁷He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’ ²⁸And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; DO this, and you will live’ (Luke 10:25-28)

But the account goes on:

29 But wanting to justify himself, [the lawyer] asked Jesus, 'And who IS my neighbor?'

³⁰Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

³³But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend."

³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' ³⁷He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

The religious people, the ones who relied on ritual without love, passed the wounded man by. But the Samaritan, who had little if any correct ritual, had love and compassion, and that is why God approved of him.

Having compassion on the needy, and helping them is what we are to be doing as individuals and THAT is what are to be doing as a church.

3. Thank you

There is an old church out on West Dryden Road. I imagine that at one time it contained a vibrant congregation filled with people who loved God and each other and tried to help needy people around the world. It must have been 5 or 6 years ago that it was renovated and became a community center. I guess that didn't fly and now I see that it is up for sale again.

Our church is far different than that building. As the kids said in their service on June 14th: "This building we are in is not the church. This is where the church gathers for worship. The church is really the PEOPLE who join together to praise God." The only thing that keeps this church building from going up for sale is you, you and I. And the only way we WILL stay vital and alive is if we stay on the Rock, who is Jesus Christ.

This morning I want to thank all of you for staying in Christ and for all you have done for the Lord over this past year.

Last September MOPS (Mothers of Pre-Schoolers) began in our church. At the March 25th meeting, 16 moms and 17 children attended.

Our church has a website. You can log on and get church information, read or listen to sermons, participate in a chat room or email the church.

This past April our first Women's Retreat was held. It took a LOT of time to plan, but it was a resounding success and those who attended are looking forward to next year.

In these tough financial times, more people in our community need food and we are providing it through the Kitchen Cupboard which, is serving many more people this year, most of them children. We also supported the youth group who made up Thanksgiving baskets, held Undy Sunday raised money for the SPCA.

This past year we raised thousands of dollars to help the needy around the world through the Christmas Joy Offering, Heifer International, One Great Hour of Sharing and Blanket Sunday.

Some of you serve as elders and deacons, some as auditors, some on the Nominating Committee, and some on church finances. Some help with yard work, some sing in the choir, some serve on committees, some put on coffees, some teach Sunday school and some lead the youth. We have a VERY dedicated staff.

We have a wonderful praise and Worship Team who plan and lead the opening of the service each Sunday.

Conclusion – etched on God's hand

Let me tell you a story. When I was in seminary, I started a window washing business. One of the houses I worked on was on the island of Nahant, off the Massachusetts coast north of Boston. That particular home was built in the early 1800s and the owners were determined to preserve the original building.

It was a huge home and the man who owned it gave me a tour and then he described his problem. He could not see through the windows facing the sea and he wanted me to clean them so he could. I looked at the windows, came back in and told him it couldn't be done.

Why? Because the glass had become etched. After 15 decades of pelting by winds from the ocean that contained salt and fine sand, the windows were pitted, etched, sort of like sea glass. I explained that the etching was so deep, there nothing to be done except to replace the panes of glass.

There is an interesting passage in Isaiah 49:15, 16a. There God says:

“Can a woman forget her nursing child,
Or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even THESE may forget, yet I will not forget you.
See, I have etched you on the palms of my hands...”

If we were written on God's hands with pastels, God could brush us off.

If were painted on with oils, God could clean us off with turpentine.

But each person who has faith in Jesus is ETCHED on God's hands, like names are etched in granite, and

if we keep our faith in Jesus and

if we love God and love others as Jesus tells us to love,

God will hold us in the hollow of his hand forever and ever and ever.

Amen.