

#233 "Clean Hands and a Pure Heart"

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One of the more iconic scenes in classic literature is played out in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. After MacBeth and Lady MacBeth conspire to murder King Duncan, Lady MacBeth, who initially seems the more hardened to the effects of guilt, essentially loses it and begins ranting about the blood that she can't get off her hands no matter how many times she washes them. Of course, there is no blood visible to the eye, but her conscience, even while she is asleep, knows that there is blood on her hands. Long before Shakespeare came along, our Lord indicted the people of Israel for a similar sin, saying that they had blood on their hands.

In Isaiah 1, the Lord tells Israel that He has had enough of their animal sacrifices and that He takes no pleasure in them (v. 11) because they are worthless (v. 13) in light of the fact that they are constantly sinning and violating the laws of God. He says that their solemn assemblies, feasts, holy days, incense, offerings, and prayers are a burden to Him and that they are making Him weary (v. 14). He says that He will hide from them when they pray and that He will not listen to their petitions because their "hands are covered with blood" (v. 15). Until they were willing to wash themselves and make themselves clean by repenting and seeking God's forgiveness (v. 16-17), all of their "holy" and "sacred" acts were worthless and even annoying to God. They needed to begin doing good, seeking justice, and defending the needy (v. 17). Then, once their hands were clean and their hearts pure (Psalm 24:3-5), they could enter the presence of God in worship and praise Him in His house in a way that would bring Him joy rather than grief.

When we enter the house of God, we need to think about the state of our hearts. Is their blood on our hands? That is, is our conscience crying out that we are guilty before God for having broken His commandments, for failing to do the good we know we should do, or for being caught up in self-righteousness? Ecclesiastes 5:1 says, "Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil." Just going through the religious motions is no good if we haven't drawn near to God by seeking Him with all of our hearts in purity and holiness by faith. He isn't impressed with our special music, our preaching, our praying, or our singing if we are carrying bloodguilt around. In fact, God hates our hypocrisy (Isaiah 1:14). Lady MacBeth was at least bothered by her conscience. We need to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit so that we never come to take sin lightly. The great news is that when we do sin, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness if only we would come to Him contritely and humbly (1 John 1:9). With clean hands and pure hearts, our worship will no longer be annoying to God but a fragrant aroma to Him (Ephesians 5:2).

David realized in Psalm 51 after his great sin that no amount of sacrifices would restore the joy of his salvation. He says in Psalm 51:16-17, "For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise." Once his heart was contrite before God and he had confessed his

sin, David says that God would again delight in righteous sacrifices (v. 19), the key word being "righteous." There is service, and then there is "righteous" service. There is going through the motions and hiding sin in our hearts, and then there is joyful and pure sacrifice to God. Acceptable worship, service, and sacrifice before God requires that we present ourselves before God as living and holy sacrifices. Then our worship and our service will be pleasing to God rather than tiring and unacceptable (Romans 12:1-2).

Proverbs 21:3 says, "To do righteousness and justice is desired by the LORD more than sacrifice." Psalm 4:5 adds, "Offer the sacrifices of righteousness, And trust in the LORD." **In other words, holiness of character is the prerequisite to truly meaningful service because God is most interested in and glorified by the pure and clean state of our hearts.** Our goal should be willing, joy-filled service with undivided hearts (1 Corinthians 9:16-17, James 1:7, Ephesians 5:18).

God encouraged Israel to repent and turn to Him for cleansing in Isaiah 1:18-19. "'Come now, and let us reason together,'" says the LORD, 'Though your sins are as scarlet, They will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool.'" Though we will never be perfect until our glorification, God's desire is that we confront our sin and wash it in His blood, renewing our commitment to Him and serving Him with the totality of our hearts (1 Kings 8:61). As the father of two young children, I know that they like to "garden" by playing in the dirt, and they regularly need a bath. As God's children, sometimes we choose the dirt of sin over purity, and we, too, need a cleansing from our Father. Let us praise God for His Son's blood and intercession for His own, for God is always ready and willing to wash and embrace His own who come to Him desiring to obey and worship.