

“Applause for the preacher” (5)

We talked a little bit the last time we were together about how to properly handle the truth and how some sincere Christian’s compromise the Word of God by just teaching all the nice fluffy verses from the Bible. But before we get into today’s lesson, let me share with you some of the signs when you will know you’re getting old.

You feel like the morning after, and you haven't been anywhere the night before.
 Everything hurts and what doesn't hurt, doesn't work.
 You look forward to a dull evening.
 You find yourself giving good advice instead of setting a bad example.
 The candles cost more than the cake.
 The little grey-haired lady you help across the street is your wife.
 Your doctor is just old enough to be your grand daughter.
 In the morning you hear snap, crackle, pop, and it isn't your breakfast cereal.

And the point is, not only should we be growing older physically but we should be showing signs of growing older spiritually too. And if we are going to resist the temptation to leave or compromise the Will of God, we need to grow individually in Christ.

Ephesians 4:11-14 “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.”

Paul has just told us there are people out there who want to change the Word of God. You see when it comes to change, especially when it comes to changing the way we worship God, you will usually find that it has its roots in the minds of men.

But would you recognise a teaching that is from cunning and crafty men? Because the Bible says that we need to be mature enough to recognise these changes so that we won’t be tossed back and forth by every so-called new idea that comes around.

Now sometimes these ideas seem innocent enough, and you might think to yourself, for example well, **what harm does clapping our hands do in worship? What harm does raising our hands in the air in worship do?** Well, these are the two areas I would like for us to look at this morning. Because the real question we should be asking ourselves is this, **what does God say about it?**

First of all, let’s look at **hand clapping**. You see, handclapping comes in **2 forms**. **1**. You have handclapping in the form of **applause**.

If you have ever been to a football match and the team you are supporting won the game, the supporters of that team usually stand and give their approval by applauding their team’s efforts. Unless you are a Scotland fan where winning matches is rare. Or maybe you are at the theatre and you thought the performance was great and so again you would applaud the performance.

Now things like that are fine, when it comes to applauding because they are forms of entertainment and the people are expecting applause. But when it comes to worshipping God, we are not here to be entertained. And if anyone is here today who wants to be entertained in some way then you should gone to see **Robbie Williams** because he claims he can entertain you.

But when it comes to worshipping God, we are not here to be applauded, we are here to worship God and give Him the worship He deserves, and we are not here to glorify **‘self’** but God. Because it troubles me when I see and hear people applauding a sermon they have just heard.

In the **Book of Acts** after Peter and John had been preaching to the people, it says in **Acts 4:1-4**, “The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.”

Notice it doesn't say, “But many who heard the message stood up and applauded their message.” And that's because it is God who should get the glory, not the one who is speaking on God's behalf. Now I've got to tell you, I have never seen an example in the Bible where people have been told to repent in a sermon and they have responded with applause.

And that's because sermons are not just about encouraging the heart but they are also supposed to bring about a response from the heart, like repentance. There's nothing wrong with encouraging people for their efforts, speak to them and encourage them but don't over encourage with applause. Because applause just develops pride in the one you are applauding.

A frog was wondering one day how it could get away from a cold winter. Some wild geese suggested that he could migrate with them, but the frog couldn't fly. The frog said, “Leave it to me, I will come up with some great idea”. To the geese he said, “You take this strong reed, each holding each end,” the frog would hold onto the reed with his big mouth. On their journey people were astonished at the great team effort. People looked up and said, “Who came up with such a clever idea?” The frog was so full of pride, he said, “It was my idea”. At that moment he opened his mouth, he fell to his death.

Proverbs 29:23 “A man's pride brings him low, but a man of lowly spirit gains honour.” Pride says, “Look at me, and look at my efforts.” A lowly spirit says, “Look at God, let's give thanks to God for what He has done through this person.”

And please don't misunderstand me, I'm not saying we should never clap our hands anywhere we go. I'm saying when we are worshipping God, our focus needs to be on God because trust me, there is already enough pride in the hearts of preachers and teachers. After all you wouldn't applaud your husband or wife when they come home from a day at the office after a good day's work, would you?

The preacher is doing his job, he's doing God's work. Clapping our hands in applause after a sermon can never be right because it takes the focus away from God and on to ‘self’” We are here to glorify God and give Him thanks, not preachers or teachers. We shouldn't applaud anyone or anything we do during our worship assemblies but we should worship as Paul tells us in **1 Corinthians 14:40**, “Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.”

2. You have handclapping in the form of **rhythmical accompanied by singing**.

In other words, you clap your hands to the beat of a song. Now we are going to look at this in more detail the next time we are together. But for now, let me just say that some people say, “OK, I agree that we shouldn't use instrumental music, so we won't use any guitars or drums etc, but we will use our hands.” And so the suggestion is that we replace musical instruments with our hands.

One text sometimes used to back up handclapping is **Psalm 47:1** which reads, “Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy.” But **Psalm 47:5**, also says, “God has ascended amid shouts of joy, the LORD amid the sounding of trumpets.” If **Psalm 47:1** authorizes hand-clapping in our worship services, then **Psalm 47:5** also authorizes shouting, and sounding of trumpets.

And if this Scripture commands hand-clapping in worship, then it is not a matter of choice, we all should do what the text says, we all should ‘Clap our hands,’ we all should ‘shout to God,’ and we all should ‘sound a trumpet.’

Now let me ask you, apart from hurting your hands when you clapping so much, how can you teach and admonish one another with your hands? How can you tell someone who is a visitor in our assembly about God by clapping your hands to the rhythm of the music? Isn't that why God blessed us with voices?

Hebrews 13:15 “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise--the fruit of our lips that confess his name.” Colossians 3:16 says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”

The heart is the only instrument that the Lord Jesus authorised us to make music with. Because not only is God pleased and glorified with our heart felt praises unto Him but when we sing, we also teach and admonish our own hearts or minds at the same time. Now I'm not going to go right into all that right now but like I said, we will look at the subject of music next time. But God does authorise and enjoys worshippers to sing words with meaning and to make music in or on the human heart.

Now what about those who say, “Well, you know I'm expressing by heart felt happiness to God when I clap my hands?” James 5:13, tells us that if you are so overjoyed with your Lord, sing, or as James puts it, “Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.” What about those who say, “Well, there are plenty examples of people clapping their hands in the Bible?”

Well you need to realise that handclapping in the Bible was mainly for cultural reasons, not for religious reasons. For example do you remember when Jehoiada brought out the king's son and put the crown on him and he presented him with a copy of the covenant and proclaimed him king?

The Bible says in 2 Kings 11:12, “That they anointed him, and the people clapped their hands and shouted, “Long live the king!” This was cultural, this was something they did when a new king was put on the throne but it was for the king's benefit not God's and remember this was not worshipping God. And if this passage of Scripture authorizes hand-clapping in our worship services, then it also authorises ‘appointment services’ for rulers and the other fan-fare that goes along with such political affairs in our worship service.

And you can't go back to the Old Testament to justify something that wasn't authorised by God in the first place. Solomon introduced instruments into the temple worship but God never authorised it. And if you are going to use that as an argument for accepting musical instruments then you need to go and find a temple to do that in. You need to find a Levitical high priest, to approach God for you and you better remember to take a sacrificial lamb with you as a sin offering.

You see, we are not under the Old Testament law anymore, because Jesus nailed it to the cross. Colossians 2:14 “Having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.” We are not under the Old Testament law anymore but a superior law, a better law and that is the law of Christ.

Hebrews 7:18-22 “The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God. And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever.’” Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.”

Loved ones we don't need to clap our hands to show visitors that we enjoy praising God. Because when we sing, we sing praises to God, and it's for God's benefit, not for people's benefit. And we don't need to clap our hands to express our feelings towards God. We already expressed our feelings to God when we admitted we were sinners and confessed His Son as Lord of our lives. We express our feelings towards God every day of our lives by being obedient to His Word.

Which brings me to my next point, when it comes to understanding worship, we need to be careful not to let our emotional feelings get in the way of God's will. Proverbs 14:12 “There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death.” When it comes to worshipping God, the world seems to have its own ideas about what God wants from them.

You watch these TV programmes like Songs of Praise or the ‘God channel’ and you just can't help but notice that more and more people are standing when they are praying, with their eyes closed and their hands floating about in the air.

It's a bit like the time I went to America to visit some friends and we got off at Denver airport. We got off the plane and we knew that security was going to be a bit tight. And so the kids just walked through security but I was stopped and the officer there said he wanted to search me. So the first thing I did was raise my hands in the air but the officer said to me, "Sir, you are not under arrest, you can just stretch your arms outwards, that will do just fine." Well, he laughed at me, along with the kids, but the point is, because I didn't know better, I thought that was what I was supposed to do.

And that's how many people think today, when it comes to worshipping God. They see people raising their hands on TV and so they think this is the norm, they think that is what God wants them to do with their hands. Well that may be the norm for some but it's certainly not the norm for the Lord's church.

It's much like the hand clapping we spoke about earlier, it focuses on 'self'. It's very much a "Look how tuned into God, I am", "Look how spiritual I am!" Even when some people are singing and they sway their hands in the air, it's very much outwardly, isn't it? Are there any examples of whole congregations in their worship service, all clapping or raising their hands to God in the New Testament?

No! And I'll tell you why there isn't any example of whole congregations clapping in time with music or raising their hands to God in prayer because that wasn't the norm back then. Listen loved ones you can do whatever you want with your body but if God doesn't own your heart, your worship is in vain. Even God's very own people were really good at looking good, and they wanted everyone around them to see that they were God's people.

Matthew 6:16-18 "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth; they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Even when God's people prayed, it was very outwardly, for everyone to see them doing it. Matthew 6:5+6 "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth; they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Now common sense tells us that when someone is beginning our worship service to God with a word of prayer, they don't go into a room and close the door behind them. When someone opens with a word of prayer, it is their responsibility to pray on behalf of all the other saints within that congregation. And it shouldn't be a long-winded Scripture-quoting prayer, God doesn't need reminding of what He said and wrote. The opening prayer should be a simple prayer thanking God for the week gone by and asking Him to accept and bless our worship. And it's a very humble act of thanksgiving and request from God.

Now when it comes to praying to God there are many examples of praying positions in the Bible. In fact there are many different praying postures in the Bible. You have kneeling, kneeling with bowed head, kneeling with outstretched arms, kneeling with knees tucked in, standing, standing with head bowed, standing with eyes uplifted, standing with arms raised, lying face down.

Now there is nothing wrong with praying in the positions I have just mentioned, after all they are examples from the Bible. But when was the last time you saw someone leading a prayer or a whole congregation lying face down on the ground? Now I don't have a problem with people raising their hands but the question I want to ask is this, what is the motivation behind praying with your arms raised because this style of prayer is very popular today.

Why do whole congregations want to pray with their arms raised? If one person is leading everyone else in prayer, why does the whole congregation have to have their arms raised too? Well some do pray like that because others do it that way but some raise their hands in the air because they want to be seen that they are requesting something from God. The whole idea makes them feel good and when you have a whole congregation doing this at the same time then that feels even better. And if you ever get a chance to speak to some of these people who practice this position a lot, you will find that they are very much motivated along with feelings.

I remember when I worked for the Church of Scotland in a residential home because they would let you work for them as long as you had a faith of some kind. So anyway there was one woman there, who was a very nice woman but difficult to understand. She would come into work one day feeling very happy and then the next day feeling very sad. And that went on for the whole time I worked in that particular home. So one day I asked if she was all right and she said to me, “I must have upset God today, because I don’t feel His spirit with me today.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing, here was me a 4-month-old Christian thinking to myself, ‘what kind of God does she believe in’! But after a while I got to understand what she was saying, she believed in a daisy chain God. In other words, ‘God’s loves me, He loves me not, He loves me, He loves me not’. Now that’s a faith very much based on feelings, if you don’t feel very happy today, then that means God has left you.

Now I’ve got to tell you loved ones, when I am feeling unhappy that’s the very time my God says, “I will help you through this stage of your life.” My God doesn’t leave me when I’m sad, He carries me. Psalm 73:25+26 “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”

But the whole idea behind praying with your arms raised is very much based on feelings. It’s a ritual that our Lord Jesus has no time for, after all, you don’t see many people publicly kneeling to pray with outstretched arms, do you? You don’t see many people publicly praying lying face down. You don’t see many people publicly praying kneeling with their knees tucked in. You don’t see many other praying styles because they like the raising of the arms because it is very public.

When Jesus is talking about the Pharisees in Matthew 23:5-7 He says, “Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues.”

Love ones, we don’t need to feel what our God is like because we know what our God is like. And the reason we know what our God is like is because He has revealed it to us in His Word. We don’t need to feel that our God loves us because we know that our God loves us because He sent His one and Only Son in the first place. There is a lot of that going on in the religious world today, where people just want to feel good, about themselves and feel the presence of God in their lives.

Now I don’t like preaching a sermon without having any practical applications within it, so let me give you a 3 quick applications for our lives as we finish.

1. How are your hands? One of the most misused passages Scripture used to justify the raising of hands is 1 Timothy 2:8 where Paul says, “I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer.” Now if you want to interpret that as Paul saying you have to literally raise your hands in the air to pray then why do the women lift their hands? Because Paul says, “I want men everywhere to do this.”

Now I know that sometimes the Bible uses the word ‘men’ to mean both genders but here he’s actually talking about just the men. I would like to suggest to you that the emphasis isn’t on the lifting up of hands, the emphasis is on the holy hands.

How can I pray on everyone else’s behalf on a Sunday morning if my life is full of un-repent sin? How can I pray for God to help everyone here to lead godly lives, if I’m far away from God myself?

You see, Paul is stressing the necessity of public prayers coming from holy lives, he’s talking about holy behaviour. Romans 16:16 “Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey--whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?”

I love the film Shawshank Redemption. And near the end of the film one of the inmates got released after spending almost all of his adult life in prison. He couldn’t handle life on the outside because all his friends were in jail. Anyway he couldn’t handle his freedom and so he hung himself. And when word about his

death got back to Shawshank the two main characters were talking about it and one of them said this, “A man has only got two choices in life, he can get busy living or busy dying.”

Now you too have that same choice, you can carry on sinning which leads to death and so at the same time get busy dyeing. Or you can come to Jesus who will help you on the road to righteousness and get busy living. Jesus says in **John 10:10** “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

Even if you are a Christian this morning and you have turned away from God over the past few weeks, you too have the same choice. You can carry on leaving God out of your life and get busy dieing again, with unholy hands, or you can return to God, repent of your ways and get busy living again, with holy hands.

2. Don't be influenced by others. In **1 Samuel 8** we find God's people screaming out to Samuel for a king and in **verses 19+20** the Bible says, “But the people refused to listen to Samuel. “No!” they said. “We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.”

God's people didn't understand that they already had a king, God Himself, but they wanted to be like other nations around them. Now many people claim there are many roads to heaven, but all roads do not lead to heaven. Jesus Himself said in **Matthew 7:13+14** “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

Don't be influenced by what is going on around you and finally **3. Let God add the growth to His church.** Another reason why people want their worship services to be a bit more upbeat is because it attracts people in, especially younger people.

This is so popular in today's society where you have bands playing Gospel music, you have hi-tech religious raves and so on. But the problem with that is, it is the music that is attracting people into their congregations in the first place, not the Gospel. **Hebrews 4:12** “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”

We need to let the Word of God convict people of their sin. We don't need up beat singing and musical instruments to bring people into our worship assemblies. We don't need our arms raised in the air to show everyone how spiritual we are. We don't need to clap our hands when we are singing to show our appreciation to God. Our focus needs to be on God, not on ourselves or individuals. Yes we'll try to glorify God in our worship, but we'll also plant and water the seeds that He helps us sow, and leave the adding of people to His church up to God.