

THE HANDS OF JESUS



6 STUDIES FOR SMALL GROUPS
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SIX STUDIES FOR SMALL GROUPS

TITLE OR THEME: The hands of Jesus & our hands

1. **Hands of compassion - Matthew 8:1-17**
2. **Servant hands – John 13: 1-17**
3. **Hands that broke bread – John 21:1-14**
4. **Healing hands – Mark 7: 31-37**
5. **Hands of blessing – Mark 10:13-16, Matthew 18:1-9**
6. **Wounded hands – John 20:19-29**

How to use these studies:

They can be used as small group study material and or combined with a sermon series; there are six accompanying sermons available for free download at <http://petercorney.com>. They could also be used for individual personal reflections. The Bible text is from the NIV translation.

The structure of each study:

1. The theme
2. An introductory question or exercise to get people thinking on the theme
3. The core material of the study and Bible passages.
4. Questions and exercises for group discussion
5. A “take-away” task
6. A thought for the week.

Introduction:

As we read the life of Jesus in the Gospels and his interactions with people one of the things that is not immediately obvious is the way he uses his hands, but when you focus on it, it is striking and suggestive. Often when he heals the sick he touches them. Although Jesus doesn't need to touch in order to heal he often does. With his hands he washes dirty feet, he breaks and serves bread, and he cooks fish and hands it around to his disciples. He takes children into his arms and places his hands

on them in blessing, and on the cross his hands are cruelly pierced. In our imagination we can also easily see Jesus warmly embracing his friends, clasping a shoulder or hand in affection or encouragement, waving a greeting or a farewell, emphasizing a point as he teaches, holding out his open hands in prayer to his Father. They are hands that are used to hard work, they are tradesman's hands. Jesus the divine son of God is also fully human and so like us he used his hands to communicate, to express himself, to convey feelings; empathy, encouragement, support, love, friendship.

Because we use them constantly it is easy to forget how important and significant our hands are, only when we injure a finger or our hand and can not use them do we realize how much we rely on them. But they are not only critically useful to us in all our everyday tasks they are also part of our “language”, our means of expression. Our hands are used to convey a great range of messages and emotions. They are used for greetings and farewells, to express friendship, affection and love, to show praise and anger. We point in accusation, we shake a fist in anger, and we clap in appreciation and congratulation.

As disciples of Jesus we are called to follow him, he is our teacher, guide and model for the way we should live. In one of his conversations with the disciples after his resurrection and shortly before he was to leave them in body he said “As the Father has sent me so I send you”.

We are now to be Jesus' hands in the world! In these six studies we are going to focus on the way Jesus used his hands and what they tell us about the way we should live and act as his disciples.

STUDY 1: HANDS OF COMPASSION

1. Open with prayer

2. The leader or someone who reads well reads the introduction above on page 2.

3. Introductory exercise:

Ask everyone to place their hands in their lap and look at them. Think of all the things you do with them every day from driving the car to making your breakfast to checking your email! Now think of the various ways we use our hands to convey feelings and messages. Our hands are like words or symbols, they communicate a great deal. Go around the group and ask each person to share their ideas.

4. The core study material: *Hands of compassion.*

Read Matthew 8:1-17 aloud in the group

The leader reads the following background notes:

In this passage we see Jesus touching others with compassion. Jesus does not have to touch to heal, as with the Centurions' servant in vs.5-13, but he frequently does.

Because of the first century understanding of the disease, lepers were isolated and excluded from the general community, their families and friends; no one touched them for fear of contracting the feared disease. Jesus' touch may have been the first physical human contact this man had received for years.

5. An exercise:

(A) Ask everyone to close their eyes for a few minutes and imagine themselves as the Leper in the story. What would it have felt like to be physically touched with care and compassion by some one for the first time in years? As well as the amazing experience of your body being made whole again what would you feel emotionally? Share your thoughts around the group.

(B) We all have different levels of comfort with touch, some of us are very touchy-feely others not so expressive. But we all need to feel cared for and affirmed. Now think about a time when you really valued someone visiting you and expressing their care when you were sick or distressed. How did it make you feel? Share your experiences around the group.

6. A take-away task:

This week think about how you can reach out and "touch" someone with compassion care and concern. Physical touch may not be appropriate but a kind word, a listening ear, a practical offer of help may be.

7. A thought for the week:

Imagine a local church full of people who want to reach out and touch others with compassion and care.

8. Close with prayer

STUDY 2: SERVANT HANDS

1. Open in prayer

2. An introductory exercise:

Having your feet washed is usually a very pleasant experience. As the person's hands caress the soap and water over them it is very soothing like a gentle massage. When was the last time you had your feet washed by someone or when was the last time you washed someone's feet? Share your experiences around the group.

3. The core study material: *Servant hands* - Read aloud in the group John 13:1-17 and Mark 10: 42-45

The leader reads the following background notes:

Part of the ritual of welcome for visitors in Jesus' time was the washing of their feet. Guests removed their sandals at the door and water was provided to wash their feet. This task was normally done by a servant not the head of the house or the host. That is why Peter is so surprised at Jesus' action (vs 6-8).

Questions for discussion:

(A) What was Jesus teaching his disciples by this action of washing their feet? (see John 13:12-16)

(Notes: In verse 16 Jesus is making the point that if he their Lord and Master is willing to be a servant (*Mark 10:45*) then the disciples, who are his servants and messengers, should be willing to serve others. Note also that by describing them as *messengers* as well as *servants* Jesus implies that being a messenger of the good news about him to others is also a way of serving people, it is as

much a servant task as practical care and washing feet. Being both servants and messengers is a helpful way to think about our role as disciples' and the importance of keeping the balance of both **word and deed** in our witness to others.)

(B) Washing feet is a symbolic action here, it stands for serving others. Reflect on the people you interact with regularly at home, at church and at work, how could you serve them so their life is a little easier and more enjoyable? Each person share one idea with the group.

(C) Is there a need or program of care in your community that you could offer to serve in or is there an unmet need that a group of you could organize to meet?

(D) How could you, as a *messenger* of Jesus, be more active in serving others by bringing the good news about him to them in word as well as deed?

4. A take-away task:

This week reflect on your involvement in your Christian community. Are you an active practical servant of your Christian community? How could you serve others more, especially in humble ways that do not have a lot of kudos or a high profile?

5. A thought for the week:

Would you be happy to wear a badge or a T shirt with the logo of a bowl and a towel as a symbol of your Christian discipleship?

6. Close in prayer and/or sing *The Servant King* by G Kendrick.

STUDY 2: SERVANT HANDS

Other ideas you could use in this study.

1. **Foot washing:** You could commit yourselves symbolically to greater servant hood by the washing of each others feet. Do this by dividing into pairs and washing the feet of your partner. You would need to prepare for this by having enough bowls and towels.
2. **The story and the drawing.** The story behind the famous drawing by Durer of *The Praying Hands* could also be used to illustrate the power of servant hood.



The story:

The drawing of *The Praying Hands* is by the famous 16th C. European artist and engraver Albrecht Durer's. It is said that the hands belong to his brother, also an artist but who put his artistic career aside to work in manual labor to support his brother in the development of his gift. The drawing is Durer's tribute to his brother's sacrificial love and service.

Durer's artistic output and the development of his considerable gift coincided with the Reformation in Europe and the invention of the printing press. The reformers wanted to put the Bible into everyone's hands in their own language. When the Bible was translated into the ordinary language of the people and mass produced on the new printing presses Durer's woodcuts and engravings were used to illustrate the text. They were among the first mass produced graphics or pictures. Up till this time the only pictures were on the walls of churches or the castles and homes of the rich and powerful. Durer's brother not only served him but thousands of ordinary people by bringing alive the Bible to them in pictorial form. Servant actions are blessed by the Holy Spirit and often have a ripple effect we can not anticipate.

STUDY 3: HANDS THAT BROKE BREAD

1. Open with prayer.

2. An introductory exercise:

What is the thing you most enjoy about a meal with family or friends?

Share your responses.

3. The core study material: *Hands that broke bread.*

The leader reads the following background notes to the group:

Hands and meals go together. With our hands we prepare meals serve the food and eat it, meals are a very physical, tactile event. In the Middle East people in Jesus' time ate with their hands not knives and forks. The disciples' had eaten a lot of meals together with Jesus. They spent several years on the road together. Sometimes they would have eaten in village inns, sometimes on the road by a well, sometimes in the homes of friends and supporters like Mary and Martha at Bethany, sometimes at a wedding, sometimes on the shores of Lake Galilee. Meals feature prominently in the gospels and Jesus introduced a number of very significant ideas over a meal.

There were some very memorable ones like the miraculous feeding of the crowd of 5,000 people that had come to hear Jesus teach.⁽¹⁾ The disciples would have remembered their astonishment as the simple lunch of bread and fish of one small boy just kept replenishing itself as they passed it around in baskets to the crowd. Later, using the meal and the bread as a metaphor, he taught them that people's deep spiritual hunger can only be met by receiving him, the bread of life, into their lives.⁽²⁾ Then there was the last Passover meal they shared together in that upper room when he explained the meaning and purpose of his coming death.

They would remember his hands as he broke the bread and passed the cup of wine, the words he spoke now etched in their memories "Do this in remembrance of me".⁽³⁾

But perhaps the most memorable was the meal in the same upper room after his crucifixion when they had gathered, traumatized, confused and fearful and he appeared to them in his risen presence. To reinforce his reality, that it really was him, he showed them his hands and the scars where the nails had pierced them and asked them to touch the scars.⁽⁴⁾

Then lastly there is the meal on the beach, his third resurrection appearance. Seven of them had gone fishing; it was as if they needed to do something normal and familiar after the drama they had been through. One can imagine Peter saying 'We can't just sit around twiddling our thumbs while we are waiting for instructions, let's go fishing!'

(1) John 6:1-15 (2) John 6:25-35, 48-51 (3) Luke 22:1-20 (4) John 20:19-28., Luke 24:36-43.

Here is how John describes the event.

Read John 21:1-14 aloud in the group.

4. An exercise:

Ask people to close their eyes as the leader or someone who reads well reads the following:

"Imagine the scene on the lake shore. You have just dragged the boat up on the beach, it's heavy with fish and wet nets, you're wet too, but happy with the catch. You smell the fire, the bread and the fish cooking, you realize how hungry you are! You hurry up the beach and join the circle of your friends around the fire.

Jesus is handing around the bread and cooked fish. You reach out your hands, he

STUDY 3: HANDS THAT BROKE BREAD

smiles at you as he gives you the food. That smile full of warmth and humor. You look down at his hands as he places the food in your open palms. Those hands mean so much to you. They are strong carpenter's hands. They have gripped yours in friendship so many times.

You remember them reaching out to touch and heal the sick and accept the outcast, they are gentle too. You remember them vividly as they broke bread at that last Passover when he told you what was to come. But most of all, the most painful memory, you remember them stretched out on the cross in suffering.

And then like a stab of joy you feel the brush of his hand as he places the food in yours and you realize with tremendous energy, he is alive and he is with you. The dream, the hopes, the future hasn't died it has only just begun. Fresh bread and grilled fish never tasted so good!"

Questions for discussion:

- (A) How would you have felt if you were one of the disciples there that morning? Spend some time now sharing your impressions and feelings.
- (B) How could we through food and meals share hospitality more and create greater fellowship and community in our congregation?
- (C) Are there people in our wider community who need friendship and care and could be reached through hospitality?

5. A take away task:

If you are preparing a meal this week for others think of your hands as the hands of Jesus serving and ministering to them. Pray over your preparations.

6. A thought for the week:

How can I with my hands serve others like Jesus this week?

Another idea for this study.

It would be good to have it in the context of a meal with the group.

Perhaps even have a simple Lords Supper over the table at the end of the meal. Or the leader breaks a loaf of bread at the beginning as they say grace and then passes it around and each person breaks off a piece and shares it with their neighbor saying "Christ's body was broken for us". Then begin the meal.

STUDY 4: HEALING HANDS

1. Open with prayer

2. An introductory exercise:

Think about a time when you were very sick or grieving and a friend or a relative's touch or hug was greatly comforting. If you're happy to do so share this with the group.

3. The core study material: Healing hands

As we noted in study one Jesus did not need to touch to heal but he frequently did. **Read the following passages aloud in the group: Matthew 9:18-25, Mark 7:31-37, 8:22-25.**

Ask everyone to read the background notes to themselves.

The importance of touch in nursing has long been understood. Research shows that barrier nursed patients often recover slower than others. The example in Mark 6:13 and the encouragement in James 5:13-14 to anoint the sick and pray over them implies touch. Olive oil was used as a healing agent for wounds and also symbolically. This form of anointing was usually done by placing oil with ones fingers on the person's forehead. This practice continues today among many Christians. (In relation to this we should of course note the importance of the comment about faith in verse 15 of James 5). When praying for a sick person you should always ask permission before you lay on hands.)

Symbolic anointing was also part of Middle Eastern hospitality and the welcome ritual for a visitor to your home. A guest was greeted with the kiss of peace, a drop of scented oil placed on their

forehead and water provided to wash their feet. (*See Luke 7:44-46*)

The leader then reads the following: Touch as a metaphor

We can also think of touch as a metaphor for emotional and relational connection with others. We all carry with us areas of our inner life where we need the 'touch' of comfort, empathy, understanding, encouragement, affirmation and thanks. These can all be acts of healing. We should also remember the large number of people who live alone today in our modern cities; the elderly, the widowed, the divorced, the single adult, and the intellectually disabled. Such people often become "touch deprived".

Questions for discussion:

- (A) How many times is touch or hand mentioned in the Bible passages we just read?
- (B) How could you appropriately go about reaching out to people around you who you know are lonely and isolated?
- (C) Do you have a prayer team in your church that visits and prays for the sick, if not could you ask your minister to start and train one? Could you also offer your help?

4. A take-away task:

This week think about the people in your circle of family, friends, neighbors, work colleagues and church members and try and identify those who you think need the 'touch' of encouragement, companionship, affirmation, or emotional support. Ask God to place someone on your heart to contact.

STUDY 4: HEALING HANDS

5. A thought for the week:

The Holy Spirit is described as **The Comforter**, in what areas of my life do I need his touch to comfort me?

6. Close with prayer:

You could pray around the circle, each person mentioning by Christian name one person they know who is in need of the touch of healing and encouragement.

Another idea you could use:

Before you break for coffee ask the group to stand in a circle behind each other and give the person in front a gentle shoulder massage.

STUDY 5: HANDS OF BLESSING

1. Open with prayer.

2. Introductory exercise:

Ask each person to make a list of how many children they have regular contact with each week.

3. The core study material:

Hands of blessing

Ask someone to read Mark 10:13-16 to the group.

The leader then reads the following background notes:

In the time of Jesus women and children were not given the same respect as men, they were considered inferior and marginalized in many ways. It is striking that Jesus often goes out of his way to notice and affirm them. In this study we will think about our obligations to and care of children.

In the reading we see Jesus taking the children in his arms, embracing them and laying his hands on them in blessing. This action in biblical and Jewish culture was a sign of more than affection; it is a symbolic action that confers status, authority, power and blessing from God. Fathers passed on their inheritance, rights and the future of the family and clan to their children in this symbolic act. Jesus is conferring great importance and significance on children in this action.

We see the importance of what Jesus did here with the children if we connect this incident with another where Jesus brings a little child into the circle of the disciples and then presents them with some very strong and challenging teaching.

Read Matthew 18:1-14

Questions for discussion:

- (A) Why do you think Jesus uses such dramatic illustrations here to drive his point home? (vs 6-9)
- (B) What is the meaning of the metaphor of cutting off hands and gauging out eyes? (vs 8-9)
- (C) What might our sins be in relation to our responsibility to children that requires such drastic moral and spiritual surgery?
- (D) What are our moral and spiritual responsibilities to our children, both in our families, and our church life? (vs 10-14)
- (E) Is the children's and youth ministry in our congregation the best we can do, does it have a high priority?

4. A take-away task:

Think of the children you have regular contact with, how can you "Bless them?" (If you're a parent reflect on how much time you spend sharing your faith with your children.)

5. A thought for the week:

"See that you do not look down on one of these little ones." (Jesus)

6. Close in prayer:

Each person mention the first name of a child they know.

STUDY 6: WOUNDED HANDS

1. Open with prayer

2. Introductory exercise:

We can't and don't have to experience every aspect of suffering to be able to empathize with others but common experience is a very bonding thing and helps us to identify with others in their difficulties. Can you think of an experience you have been through that helped you to give comfort to another person with a similar difficulty? If you feel free share this with the group.

3. The core study material:

Wounded hands.

Read Isaiah 53:1-12, John 20: 24-29 aloud in the group.

The leader reads the following background notes:

Jesus' wounded hands remind us that our selfishness, our hurtfulness to others, our lies, our pride, our petty as well as our more gross sins, always have a cost. The cost is the hurt to others and to us, and for them to be forgiven, the great cost to God of the cross.

Jesus' wounded hands also remind us that he understands our suffering. He came among us, became fully human and identified with us in all our fragility, our joy and pain. The Christian poet Elizabeth Rooney in a powerful poem writes:

*Only pierced hands
Are gentle enough
To touch some wounds...*

*You need
To have been crucified yourself
If you would find the tenderness
To stay and share the pain...*

(Elizabeth Rooney,
from "A Widening Light: Poems of the
Incarnation" p99, pub. Harold Shaw Wheaton,
Illinois 1984)

Questions for discussion:

- (A) Are there people you know whose problems or needs you find difficult to keep fronting up to, it is just so challenging? How do you deal with that?
- (B) How can we gain the strength to identify with and be alongside people in great need?

Review:

Before you close this week briefly review the main idea in each of the previous studies. If there is time ask people to share what they have got out of the studies and if they have decided to make some change in their life as a result.

5. A takeaway task:

Is there someone in your circle of relationships who has a need or problem that you also have been through and can understand? Can you pray and ask God if you should reach out to them?

6. A thought for the week:

There is nothing I can experience that Jesus does not understand

7. Close with prayer