

The Holiness of God: The Problem of Holiness

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2 Samuel 6:1-7; Acts 5:1-14; Luke 12:1-10

Our final Scripture reading today is Luke 12:1-10. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying: “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs. I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God. But he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.””

Tomorrow is Pi Day. Now I don't mean Pie Day, although if you want to eat some apple pie on Pi Day, nobody's going to stop you. It's March 14th, or 3/14, which also corresponds to 3.14, the first three digits of Pi. Now for those of you like me who haven't done geometry since high school, Pi is a mathematical constant. It's the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter. In other words, if you can draw a line through the middle of a circle from one end to the other, you can figure out how far around the circle is. It's basic enough to geometry that the ancient Greeks knew about it; that's where the name Pi, P I, comes from, from the Greek letter.

There's one little hitch. You can't calculate the absolute value of Pi. It's an infinite decimal; it goes on forever; you can't get to the end of it. Believe it or not, a Google employee from Japan has figured out Pi to 31 trillion digits. Not million, not billion, but 31 trillion digits. You could spend a million lifetimes and you'd never get to the last digit. It never ends. It is a problem that you cannot solve. While several decimal points are fine even for most engineering purposes, it's one of those things we just can't figure out.

I had this in mind partially because Cameron's class is memorizing Pi to 50 digits for a pie party this week, but also because we're dealing with another problem we can't solve in our series this week. We've shifted gears for a few weeks from the book of Genesis to talk about The Holiness of God. Last week, we got an overview of the holiness of God from Isaiah 6 – from Isaiah's moment in the throne room of heaven where he was given the opportunity to see God. We started to glimpse the vastness, the enormity, the transcendence of the infinite God we worship. We started to get a sense of just how powerful and honorable God truly is. We saw Isaiah's reaction of awe and panic, and how God restored Isaiah and made him a prophet without comparison in his generation.

Now the holiness of God is wonderful, it's powerful – it is truly what defines God, His amazing otherness and perfection and beauty and justice all kind of taken as a whole. God's holiness is something that blesses us constantly. And yet, there is a real problem with holiness. The problem with God's holiness is that it can also be very, very dangerous.

Today we're going to look at several incidents in the Bible where people run into the holiness of God head-on with disastrous results. Some are from our readings, but we're going to expand beyond that as well. All of these are going to illustrate for us the problem of God's holiness for us.

One of the first times we encounter the dangerous nature of God's holiness is the books of Exodus and Leviticus. Let me set the stage for us: God has rescued the Israelites out of Egypt, where they wind up at the end of the book of Genesis. They've been slaves in Egypt for a long time, and through miraculous signs and wonders, God leads them into the wilderness south of the promised land. God has started teaching them His laws and His ways through Moses.

Now the people have already seen the holiness of God on display when they reached Mount Sinai. God promised to come down and meet them there. They had been warned not to touch the mountain or they would die; God told Moses to have boundaries set up so the Israelites wouldn't breach them. When God arrives, there is thunder and lightning and a mighty trumpet blast. On the mountain is smoke like a furnace; the mountain itself was like what you'd expect during an earthquake. The people are terrified. The people told Moses, "Let us not hear the voice of the LORD our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die." They knew the holiness of God would overwhelm them.

Some time later, Aaron, Moses' brother, is commissioned to be Israel's high priest, a line that's to go through his sons. He makes all the proper sacrifices to be installed in the position, and Israel is blessed, and the glory of the LORD appears to all of Israel, and fire comes out from the presence of the LORD and immediately consumes the offerings Aaron has made. It's a joyful moment in the camp; the people shout for joy; they fall on their faces in worship.

Then two of Aaron's sons, Nahab and Abihu, take their censers and put coals in them, and what do they do? They light incense on them. Sounds all well and good, right, an offering to the LORD? The problem is, on this most holy occasion, where God is present with the Israelites, where He has made His glory known, Nahab and Abihu decide to take matters in their own hands. God has not asked for or approved of this offering. In fact, it's called "strange fire," fire that is illegitimate. It's an offering contrary to what God requested. And the same fire that consumed the offerings instantly consumes Nahab and Abihu. And before Aaron can protest, Moses says, ""This is what the LORD spoke of when he said: ""Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored."" And Aaron kept silent. On this great day, Aaron loses two sons who think they can do whatever they want in the presence of the LORD.

We move forward in Israel's history. Israel has been in the promised land 500 years, and King David has finally established Jerusalem as his capital. The Israelites, who lost the ark of the covenant to their enemies, have finally gotten it back. Yet the procession to bring the ark to Jerusalem makes a huge mistake. The ark was made to be carried on poles. But instead, the Israelites decide it would be easier to transport it on an ox cart. It's new, never been used, so that's respectful of the LORD, right? But it's not what God commanded. And remember, the ark of the covenant isn't a symbol. God told the Israelites His presence would appear on the mercy seat of the ark between the cherubim. This is the seat of God.

Along the route, the oxcart tips. This guy named Uzzah, who's been assigned the task of guiding the cart, he goes and touches the ark to not let it fall. On one hand, Uzzah understands that it would be dishonorable for the ark to fall. On the other hand, this was never the way the ark was supposed to be carried around in the first place. And someone touching the ark was simply not to be done – only a special group of Levites, the sons of Korah, could haul the ark, and they weren't to touch it. Just as God had warned, Uzzah is immediately struck down.

This same danger is not just something for Old Testament people before the coming of Jesus. In Acts 5, Jesus has been resurrected and taken into heaven. The church has grown by a few thousand in a very short time, spreading word of Jesus and His salvation. Now Ananias and Sapphira have a piece of property. Others, like Barnabas, have sold their extra property and been commended for giving the proceeds to the ministry of the disciples. Ananias and Sapphira want the glory but they also want to hold onto some of the cash. They don't trust enough to give the whole property to God and let Him sort out their finances.

That's not what gets them in trouble, though. What causes their untimely demise is that they directly lie to Peter about what they received from the sale. Peter is the head of the apostles and the head of the church. It isn't even that they lie to him, but that because of his authority, because he represents the whole infant church, when they lie to him blatantly about a spiritual matter, they are lying to the Holy Spirit. They both drop on the spot. This terrifies both believers and unbelievers alike. Yet it's clear that the Lord's hand is on the work of the apostles; in spite of this event, more and more people have faith in Jesus and become a part of the church!

When we hear about these incidents, it can be overwhelming. Some people have a hard time believing in God when God would allow people to die on the spot for what they assume is just an offense against God's honor. Why would a good God show wrath? Why would a good God take down people for a lie, or for offering him a gift that wasn't on His registry, or for trying to keep His sacred ark from tumbling off onto the ground?

It's not that God is mad all the time; He's not. In fact, if we were to have a God's eye view on all the evil done in the world, we might be surprised at how much of it He forgives rather than immediately bringing His wrath upon it. It has more to do with the fact that in each instance, God's holiness was challenged in front of the whole community of faith. With Aaron's sons; it was in front of the entire assembly of Israel; with Uzzah, everyone in Israel knew the caravan was carrying the holiest item from the tabernacle. Ananias and Sapphira lie to the head of the church as it is just being founded. Had God not intervened, God's holiness would have been besmirched. Each time, what happened was an absolute affront to God's holiness.

Perhaps it would help us to think of God's holiness through the use of a metaphor we can understand. We all know that the sun is one of God's greatest gifts to us. We can't exist without it. Everything needs the sun. Go far enough north where there's little sunlight a lot of the year and things get so frigid you can't grow anything there. People get depression when they don't get enough sunlight. For most of history, the sun was the determining factor of when you worked, when you slept. Our seasons and our calendar have a lot to do with the earth's rotation around the sun. The sun is central to life. It's no wonder pagans worshiped the sun; without God's revelation of Himself, the sun is the most powerful thing most of us ever experience.

But the sun, despite being 93 million miles away from us, is also super dangerous. I remember as a kid going to my grandparents' home in upstate New York one summer, and I was out by their little pond for several hours. Apparently forgot the sunscreen. I came in and before long, I had second degree blisters on my arms and shoulders. It was miserable. It wasn't the first or last time I had a bad sunburn. I've known friends who've been treated for skin cancers as a direct result of being out in the sun too long without protection. I know of people whose sight has been permanently damaged by staring directly at the sun. Not for days or weeks but mere moments. And we know that God set up Earth perfectly for life, because without the atmosphere we have, without the position we have relative to the sun, without all those things, we would turn crispy very, very quick. There's a reason we have taken expeditions to the moon but none to the sun. We have no way to protect ourselves from the kind of power.

When we get a sunburn, when we get moles or worse from exposure to the sun, when we are damaged by too much time in direct sunlight without something keeping it from harming us, we don't say, "The sun is mad at me." The sun is inanimate. It has no personality. The sun is not angry with you. The sun does what it does by very nature of being a star of flammable gases. The damage the sun does at times is not at all surprising because it's what you would expect.

Now God is obviously very different from the sun. He has a personality. He is perfectly loving and perfectly kind and perfectly angry with the sin that winds up destroying us. He is not a flaming ball of hydrogen and helium. But God and the sun do have a few similarities. Both are essential to life (God much more so than the sun because He created it). Both provide for us things we cannot provide for ourselves. And if we venture too close to either one without taking appropriate protective measures, we are in for a world of hurt – not because of any emotional outpouring, but because of their very nature.

God at His very core is holy. It is His nature to be holy. To go against His holiness is to go against life itself. When someone pays the price of doing something that goes against the holiness of God, it should not shock us. But somehow it does. I still sometimes forget to put on sunscreen and then wonder why I turn into a tomato. People act in ways completely contrary to God's nature and holiness and then wonder why their lives are a mess.

We might say that God is angry with us, and perhaps in a sense He is. After all, a perfect God is grieved when His people disobey. His righteous justice demands that He be perfectly offended by violence and war, by crimes against one another and against ourselves, how we were made to be. But those punishments that come are often what we call natural consequences. Sometimes the level of offense rises to that of those situations we've looked at today. But much of the time, our miseries and punishments are no more than we'd expect given God's holiness. They flow naturally from the situation.

Again, we know this in so many situations. It's how we teach our children. "Don't play in the street and look both ways when you cross." "Don't put your fingers down a garbage disposal." "Don't stick a fork in the electrical socket." "Look before you leap." "Don't dive into shallow water." Because the natural consequences can be disastrous. In the same manner, we must be careful not to offend the holiness of God.

Our passage from Jesus today talks about the fear of the Lord, which we talked about briefly last week. But here it's in relation to when we fear what people might say or do rather than caring what the Lord thinks. When you fear God, you need fear nothing else. People can do brutal and evil things to each other, absolutely; they can kill the body. But what does that matter if they cannot kill the soul? Obey God and live eternally; obey mankind and face eternal death. The choice seems clear – follow the ways of God, even when you run afoul of the ways of man, you'll be OK.

But this is where the unsolvable problem comes up again...the problem of holiness. ***The problem of holiness is not God's holiness itself – it's our lack of holiness.*** The two are mutually incompatible. One cannot stand by the other. Unholiness and holiness cannot be fully present and sharing the same space. It's like magnetic fields – the stronger the magnets, the more they push apart. When the presence of God is in a place and someone treats the holy as ordinary or profane, the result is destruction; unholiness cannot bear the full power of God.

Here's where the problem gets worse for us. Because of our sin nature inherited from Adam, we are all going to die. We are all on a one-way trip to meet our Maker. We are all destined to wind up in the presence of the Holy One of Israel. And by His nature, by His holiness, nothing profane or unholy can stand in His presence. We know we will stand before God. What will happen to us? Will we be condemned, sent for all eternity out of God's presence because our moral rot and lack of integrity cannot bear it? Or will we be OK? Will somehow we be able to bear the presence of the maker of a hundred trillion worlds whose very word is truth and whose knowledge is absolute and whose instruction is always righteous?

The greatest problem of holiness from our end is that we can't fix it. We are already doomed before we even understand the problem. Because we sin, we disobey God's ways, from childhood, we are already under condemnation. And the reality is, no amount of good we can do can fix it. God's holiness doesn't demand just goodness; God's holiness doesn't have scales weighting half of the human population against the other half for room in His Kingdom. No, God's holiness requires total perfection. And that's something we don't have and can't regain on our own.

The problem of holiness is a serious one, and if we were left to our own devices, we would be in serious trouble. There would be no way to come into God's presence; we could expect nothing from Him except judgment. But thankfully, God makes a way because He is good. This is not the end of the story, as Christians truly know. But for now, we need to sit awhile in the recognition of the problem of holiness.

For if we do not appreciate God's holiness, if we do not sit in awe and wonder and fear of God's very being, we will take Him far too lightly and invite our own judgment. But as Scripture says, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. We need that holy fear so that we might grow wise in God's ways. May we think on God's goodness, grace, and holiness. May we have that deep fearful respect of who He is, infinitely more than the power of the sun. And may we be ready to seize upon the solution God provides for us – the solution of His Son Jesus that we'll discuss in the weeks to come.