

How do you love a holy God?

Message for Sunday, February 23, 2014
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-8

Children's Message: from John 15:4-5

[From *Christian Parables from Science*: A hot air balloon is made from a large plastic bag from the dry cleaner. It is transformed by the hot air from a hair dryer and it rises into the air.]

What if we try to follow Jesus, but we do it only by our own power? It's like this plastic bag which says, "I'm going to stand up tall. I can do it! I just need to try harder!" *Grunt and groan like it's trying it's hardest.* But it just lies there.

Let's turn on the hair dryer, so the hot air goes inside the plastic bag. As the hot air fills the bag, it stands up straight! What if the bag had said, "No, I don't need your help. I can do this by myself," and it blocked the air from coming in? It wouldn't get very far. The bag and the hair dryer have to work together for it to stand up.

Jesus says, "Follow me. Obey my commands, and follow my example." But Jesus also says, "But don't do this by yourself. You need my help. Let me live in you."

Following Jesus means Jesus has a part to do, and you have a part to do. You have to work together. Jesus' part is to work in us by the Holy Spirit, to help us change and become like him: stronger, more loving, ready to forgive, and so on. Our part is to obey, to follow his ways.

Prayer: Jesus, come into our lives. Help us to grow more like you every day. Amen.

Message: "How do you love a holy God?"¹

1) The greatest commandment is also the hardest

There is a verse in the Bible which is the foundation for all the commandments. Here it is:

Deuteronomy 6:4-5, New Living Translation:
"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.
And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your strength."

Centuries later, when some religious leaders were questioning Jesus, they asked him which is the greatest

commandment. Without hesitation Jesus quoted this same verse [Mark 12:28-31]. Everything else is built on this foundation.

Now there's a problem with this: there is not a single person in this room who has ever loved God with their whole heart for more than five minutes at a time.

2) It's hard because God is holy — and we aren't

Why is it so difficult for us to love God? We could offer up a variety of reasons, but as I read the Bible, the bottom line is this: **God is holy; you and I are not holy.** God wants us to be holy, though:

Leviticus 20:26, New International Version:
"You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own."

The Bible is one continuous story of human beings trying to love God, trying to be holy, but never making being able to span the gap that separates us. So God came in the person of Jesus to become the bridge that can join us together.

3) More than anything else, God is holy, holy, holy

The clearest example in the Scripture of this gap between a holy God and sinful humanity is found in Isaiah 6:1-8.

Isaiah grew to become one of the greatest prophets of Israel, giving God's direction to three kings, as well as warning many of the surrounding nations of God's judgment upon them. He was widely respected as a righteous and godly person. But Isaiah himself knew better. These verses in Isaiah 6 tell of how he first became a prophet.

Isaiah is in the Temple, mourning the death of the king, praying for divine help for the nation. While there, he has a vision of the awesome majesty and glory of God. God is seated on the throne, and flying around him are these strange creatures with six wings. Two wings are for flying; two wings are for covering their feet (Why? Perhaps out of modesty, some scholars suggest); and the other two wings are for covering their faces. Even though these angels were created specifically to serve in the presence of God, even they are unable to look directly upon the face of God. The glory and the brilliance of God is so intense that even the angels cannot bear it.

But I am not so much interested in the anatomy of these creatures as I am in their message of praise. To worship God is one of the most moving and incredible

¹ The idea for this message come from R. C. Sproul's work called *The Holiness of God*.

experiences a person can ever have. As I drive along the highway on my visits, I sometimes listen to worship music, and join in the singing. There have been times when I have been so overcome by a sense of the presence of God that I have had to pull the car over and stop.

Those songs that were so powerful for me were written and performed by a group of ordinary people. Can you imagine what it would be like to hear a song written in heaven itself, and sung by a choir of angels!?! What in the world would they say? Isaiah tells us:

Isaiah 6:3, New International Version:
In a great chorus they sang, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

We have a song in our hymn book that begins with those words “Holy, holy, holy” and we’ve heard it about a zillion times. There’s nothing new for us here. But there may be something old that we’ve never realized.

We have an example here of something that occurs extremely rarely in the Bible. The Hebrew people had ways of emphasizing things that are different from our ways. For instance, if I’m writing something on the computer and I want to emphasize a point, I can do several things: put it in *italics*; put it in **bold print**; underline it; make it ALL CAPITAL LETTERS; end it with an five exclamation marks!!!!; and so on. The Hebrew people had similar grammatical tricks when they wanted to emphasize something. But they also had a different method which they used to show that something was very important. They did it by repetition. They would say it over again.

Here’s an example. In Genesis 14:10 there is a war going on between various groups of kings. During the conflict, some of the soldiers fall into the “slime pits.” At least that’s what the King James Version calls them. Other translations call them the “tar pits”, the “bitumen pits”, the “asphalt pits”, or simply the “great pits”. The problem the translators have here is that the author of Genesis simply used the Hebrew word for “pit” twice. The translator says, “I can’t translate that literally. If I did, it would sound like, “they fell into the pit pits” and no one will understand that. What in the world is a “pit pit”? There are pits, and there are *pits*; and a pit pit is the pitiest kind of pit the author could think of. You fall into a pit pit, and you’re never going to get out!

That is how the Hebrew writers made their point: by repetition.

But there are only four words in the entire Bible that are repeated to the superlative degree, that is, three times in

a row.² And only one attribute of God is elevated to this third degree. The angels do not just want us to understand that God is holy. It’s not that they are so fervent and zealous for God that they want us to know that God is holy, holy. They are proclaiming that God is holy, holy, holy!

The first letter of John, chapter four, verse eight tells us that “God is love.” But the Bible never tells us that God is “love, love, love.” Nor is God ever called “mercy, mercy, mercy”, or “judge, judge, judge”, or “anything, anything, anything” — except that God is “holy, holy, holy.”

4) When we see God’s holiness, we see our own sinfulness

When Isaiah sees and hears this, what happens? He’s flat on his face. Now listen to what he says:

Isaiah 6:5, New International Version:
“Woe unto me!” I cried. “I am ruined!”

“Woe” is a strange word. It’s not commonly used in our language any more. There are plenty of occasions in the Old Testament when the prophets pronounce the message of doom and destruction upon the wicked kings and people. They too begin with, “Woe unto you...”

But here is a man who pronounces the woe — the curse of God — upon himself! Isaiah cries out, “Woe unto me! I am ruined!” In other words, “I am coming undone. I came in here having my life together. I felt like a whole person. I had integrity. I *thought* I had integrity — until I had one glimpse of the living God. And now I experience dis-integration. I fall apart.”

Why does Isaiah collapse?

Isaiah 6:5, New International Version:
“For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”

When Isaiah saw the holiness of God, it was the most excruciating experience of his life. This is not an isolated experience. Throughout the Bible, whenever people meet God in person, the reaction is always the same.

The fundamental meaning of “holiness” is that it is other, separate, altogether different. These people suddenly realized that they were in the presence of

² For the curious: the other three words are “ruin” in Ezekiel 21:27, “land” in Jeremiah 22:29, and “woe” in Revelation 8:13.

someone who transcended even the powers of nature — and thus was more terrifying than nature.

Isaiah, when he saw the holiness of God, and saw his own sinfulness, just collapsed. About twenty years ago I preached a message on the parable of the lost sheep, and how God rejoices when a sinner comes back home. In that message, I said that if mass murderer Paul Bernardo repented, there would be a huge party in heaven. A lot of people in that church were upset by what I said. I think that's because we don't recognize what true repentance really is. It's not just apologizing. It's not just feeling sorry. It's not a trick convicts use to get out of prison on early parole. We might fool others, but we can't fool God. True repentance is when we actually meet with God, and we see ourselves for who we are before this holy God, and we feel like dying.

5) Genuine repentance is painful...

Let's see what happened next to Isaiah.

Isaiah 6:6-7, New Living Translation:

Then one of the seraphim flew over to the altar, and he picked up a burning coal with a pair of tongs. He touched my lips with it.

I think that authentic repentance is one of the most painful experiences a human being can ever go through. Look at what God did to Isaiah! Imagine having a barbecue with your friends, and someone — as a joke — puts a white hot coal in your hand! Some joke! Some friend! That would be bad enough — but the angel put the coal in Isaiah's mouth!

Why did God send the angel to do that? Is God sadistic? Does God enjoy hurting people? NO!! He cauterized him. Isaiah had a dirty mouth, and God cleaned it. The angel said:

Isaiah 6:6-7, New Living Translation:

“See, this coal has touched your lips. Now your guilt is removed, and your sins are forgiven.”

How do you love a holy God? You get forgiven by him. Love God by accepting his gift of salvation.

6) ... but genuine forgiveness more than heals the hurt

When we experience forgiveness from a God who gives out forgiveness like licorice, from a God who says,

“That's OK, boys will be boys, girls will be girls.
We're all God's children.
God is love, love, love.”

— when we experience that kind of forgiveness, it's worthless. It doesn't mean anything to anybody.

But when a *holy* God says to you, “I forgive you,” how can you not love him?

Isaiah is standing there with a blistered mouth, and God is looking for a servant.

Isaiah 6:8, New Living Translation:

Then I heard the Lord asking, “Whom should I send as a messenger to this people? Who will go for us?”

I said, “Here I am. Send me.”

This was a guy that five minutes earlier was putting curses on his own head, and was disintegrated. He wanted to die. That's what we fear from a holy God: that he's going to destroy us. Instead, he's going to heal us and restore us. He wants to put us back together, so that we'll *want* to go, wherever he sends us.

Next Steps:

- Where in your life do you need to repent – that is, stop what you're doing, and follow God's way instead? Why don't you?
- Jesus came for more than just to bring us forgiveness. He also comes into our lives to make us more godly. Will you allow him?
- Do you grasp the infinite love of God for you: that a holy and pure God cares for someone as messed up as you? Receive that love, glory in it, and then return that love in all you do.

Theme for today: “Holier than thou.” That's the image which comes to mind for lots of people when we think about being holy: pious and proud of it. Sadly, that's about as far from holiness as you can get.

First of all, we don't make ourselves holy. God does that by adopting us as children: we are counted as being holy. Humility, not pride, is the mark of holiness. Second, we are called to be like God in our character and our conduct, to be godly.