

Real Love: How do you love a holy God?

Message for Sunday, June 24, 2018
by Bruce Fraser

Children's Message:

Ask them to count from 1 to 10 out loud. Pretty good! How about counting backwards from 10 down to 1?

Very good! Let's make it even harder: can you count by 2s?

Excellent! You guys are really smart!

You are able to do this because you've practised it lots and lots of times. You can recite those numbers without even thinking about it. It's not just that you've memorized it. It goes deeper than that. It's like those numbers are permanently stamped in your brain.

God says that's how we should learn his commands in the Bible.

Deuteronomy 6:5-7, New Living Translation:
You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again.

Let's try it: How do we love God? "With all our heart, all our soul, and all our strength."

Message "Real Love: How do you love a holy God?"

1) How do you love a holy God?

A well-known hymn begins with the words

Holy, holy, holy!
Lord God almighty!

Reginald Heber wrote this song around the year 1820. But those opening words did not spring out of his fertile imagination. They come straight from the Bible, from the vision that Isaiah had of heaven:

Isaiah 6:3, New Living Translation: "In a great chorus they [the seraphim] sang, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty! The whole earth is filled with his glory!"

It isn't enough to say that God is holy. We can emphasize that statement by repeating it, God is holy, holy. No, the Bible takes it to the ultimate degree, by saying it three times: God is holy, holy, holy. God is absolutely holy.

Isaiah 55:8-9, New Living Translation: "My thoughts are completely different from yours," says the Lord. "And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine."

For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts."

How do you and I compare with God? I won't presume to judge you, so I'll talk about myself. First of all, I'm not holy. At the very best, I might call myself a "good" person." After all, I don't murder, I don't steal, I don't commit adultery, I'm polite to other people, I'm involved in the community, and so on. But that doesn't mean I'm holy. Because there are days when even calling me "good" would be exaggerating. The truth is, I am a sinner.

To be holy means to be pure, to be perfect. Jesus said the greatest commandment was this:

Mark 12:30, NLT: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength."

R. C. (Robert) Sproul spoke on this passage in a sermon one time. He said, "There is not a single person in this entire room who has ever loved God with their whole heart for more than five minutes at a time." I was shocked to hear him say that openly, but I was also nodding my head, "I can sure identify with that!"

We're coming to the conclusion of this series of messages on "Real Love." We've looked at how we love friends, neighbours, enemies, children, spouses, and even ourselves. I saved the hardest one for the end: how do we love God? How can we who are not holy, love a holy God?

2) Loving God means obeying God

John 14:15, 21, 23-24, New International Version:
"If you love me, you will obey what I command. ...

"Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be

loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.” ...

“Jesus replied, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.”

That’s about as simple as you can get. Loving Jesus and God means obeying their commands. Notice: I said “simple.” I didn’t say “easy.”

Matthew’s Gospel has three consecutive chapters (Matthew 5-7) of Jesus’ commands: don’t get angry, don’t even *think* about adultery, turn the other cheek when someone hits you, do not worry about money or anything else, and more. In the middle of that passage is this:

Matthew 5:48, New International Version:

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Here’s the wall of this room. Let’s say it’s about twenty feet high. That wall represents the standard which Jesus expects from me. God is holy and perfect, and that’s what I’m supposed to be like.

I’m standing at the bottom of the wall, trying to reach up to the top. Too far. Can’t make it. I take a few steps back, make a run at it, and jump high in the air. I’m still far short of the goal.

That’s the picture of me trying to measure up to God’s standard of holiness. You are quite likely a better person than I am: more mature, more disciplined, more faithful, better at resisting temptation, more loving—in other words, more Christlike. If I’m “good,” then you’re “pretty good.” You are much closer to God’s standard of holiness than I am. But you still fall far short of the goal.

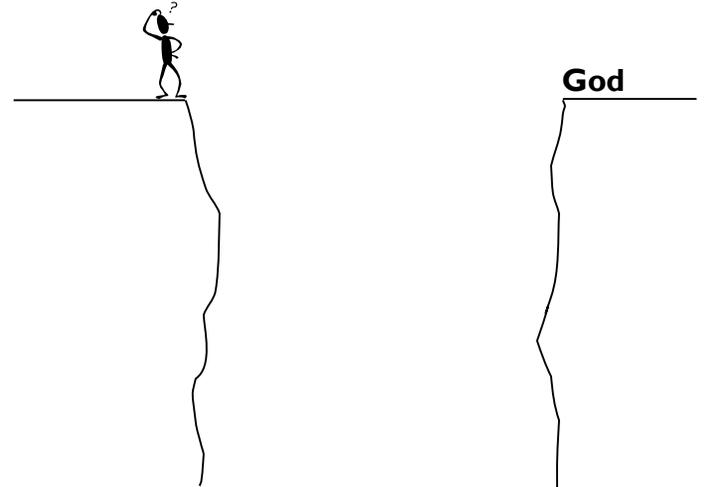
Even the most saintly person on earth, say someone like Mother Teresa or Billy Graham, would come nowhere near the mark. Because the measure of God’s holiness isn’t just the ceiling. God’s holiness is higher than the sky. Read that verse again:

Isaiah 55:9, NLT: “For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.”

So how can we ever get close to God, when we are so far apart from him? It’s enough to make person say, “It’s hopeless. *I’m* hopeless. I give up.”

3) Help and hope are close by

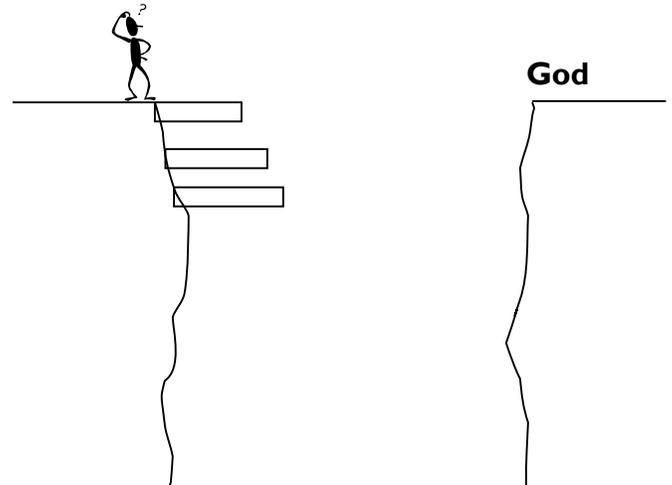
Someone once drew a picture to try to illustrate this. There is a deep, wide chasm which separates us from God.



People may try different ways to get across to God:

- by being extra good
- by being religious (go to church, read the Bible)
- by philosophy (“There are many ways to find God. All paths ultimately lead to God, so it doesn’t matter which way you take.”)

But none of these human efforts can bridge the gap:



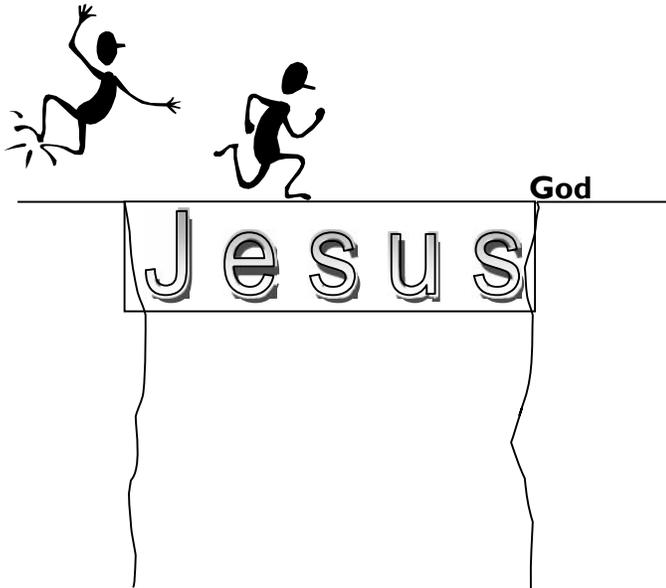
The Bible tells the good news:

John 3:16, New Living Translation:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

Jesus is the answer we need:

- When we put our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, God forgives our sins. The barrier that separates us from God is removed.
- We do not call out to some anonymous god in the darkness, but we can have a relationship with God who has reached out to us.
- He promised that we would have the Holy Spirit to live in us, so that we can have fellowship with God.



Some time ago, I had the privilege of seeing how powerful God's grace really is. It happened one day when I was visiting a patient in hospital. We had talked and prayed, and I was leaving the room, when the man in the next bed called to me and said, "I need to talk with you."

I said, "Sure, glad to!" and sat down beside his bed.

"I am a modern day Job," he began. "I had everything, and now I've lost it all."

"Tell me about it," I encouraged him to go on.

"I owned my own company, and I was worth more than a million dollars. I was married to a wonderful

woman, and we had two children whom I love dearly. Now, I've lost the company, my wife has left me, I'm forbidden to see my children, I'm going to be charged with murder, and I'll spend the next I-don't-know-how-many years in prison."

"You see, all these past years I've been living a double life. During the week, I was a successful businessman. But on the weekends, I went to the States and rode with the Hells Angels." He rolled up his sleeve and showed me the tattoo that marked him for life as a member of the Brotherhood. "It was during this time that I met my wife-to-be. I never told her about my weekends, and she never suspected a thing. I told her that I had to check in every weekend with the other half of the business on the west coast, and she believed me."

"Then one time the Hells Angels made me kill someone: 'We know where your girlfriend lives. If you don't do it, we'll do it to her.' So I did it. Not just once, but three times. Once you're with the Hells Angels, there's no way out. I was trapped."

I nodded and said, "And now the trap is sprung."

"Right. Someone must have ratted on me. My wife found out, and took the children. The Family Court judge said I can't see them. I don't blame him: would you want a motorcycle gang member with your children? I'm expecting the cops to come for me any day now. In a way, I'll be glad when it's over. The stress of living like this is killing me; that's why I'm in here."

"Like I said, I'm ready for them. But that isn't what I want to talk to you about. What I need to know is, what does God think about me?"

And so I told him the story about trying to be good enough to please God, about seeing how high on the wall I can reach. Most of the times I use that illustration, it's to make us humble. It's so that we realize that we're not as good as we think we are; we are nowhere near God's holiness. It's so that we realize how much we need Jesus.

But here was a man who already knew he wasn't good. In fact, he was afraid of just how evil he was. Because of that he was afraid of God.

When I explained that, as far as God was concerned, he was just as good as I was—that both of us were sinners who needed God’s love and forgiveness—he was thrilled. It was like coming into a dark room and opening the drapes, and letting the sun shine in. Jesus Christ brings life and light into people’s lives.

So how do you love God? Yes, by obeying God’s commands. But even more, by saying “Yes” to God’s offer of love and forgiveness. You strive to follow God’s commands, but recognize that you’ll never make it by yourself.

Next Steps:

- Just one: say “Yes” to God’s offer of grace. You can do that in the prayer right now. The key is to continue that way each day.

I invite you to pray with me:

Lord Jesus Christ,
I thank you that you came into this world to show us God’s love.

I am sorry for the things that I have done wrong in my life. [*Take a moment to ask forgiveness for anything particular which is on your conscience.*] Please forgive me. I now turn away from everything which I know is wrong.

I thank you that you died on the cross so that I can be forgiven and set free.

Thank-you that you offer me forgiveness and new life. I now receive that gift.

Please come into my life by your Holy Spirit. Fill me, and be with me forever.

Thank-you, Lord Jesus. Amen.