

# The Danger of Familiarity with God

a sermon in the series  
The Holiness of God

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2 Samuel 6:2-3, 6-10

*And David arose and went with all the people who were with him from Baale Judah to bring up from there the ark of God, whose name is called by the Name, the LORD of Hosts, who dwells between the cherubim. So they set the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill; and Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, drove the new cart.*

The same question is often asked when tragedy strikes: Why? Why did God allow this? This question, like many presumptions, is actually the wrong question to ask. It is based upon a presumption that God should keep evil from us. It is based upon an idea that the better we perform, the more God is obligated to keep evil away from us, and that He ought to do what is good because, well, we have been good.

Another dangerous presumption is that good intentions make up for any wrongs committed. In some things that is true. You've heard me say that trying to learn how to walk in the Spirit is much like learning to walk physically. You fall down and quite often. You do make mistakes learning to walk, but they are with the right intentions. Sometimes we mistake the voice of the Spirit; we believe the Lord wanted us to do something, but in retrospect it was not the direction of God.

But when it comes to worship, and especially to God's express commands, failure is failure. Good intentions or not, it is still disobedience. Why? Perhaps for no other reason than it demonstrates that we have more confidence in our wisdom than the Lord's wisdom. We think we can tweak His instructions or that somehow the command does not apply to us.

In our text today, we have two good men with good intentions. Both were disobedient. Both were wrong. And both suffered. One suffered immediate judgment that took his life; the other suffered confusion and the pain of responsibility that remained the duration of his life.

## **Background**

I want to give you the background first of all. Because of the movie *The Raiders of the Lost Ark*, almost everybody in America – whether religious or not – knows about the Ark of the Covenant. Like our Declaration of Independence, it was the symbol of Israel only greater, for God had appointed the ark to be the very earthly throne of God. He had chosen that the ark would be the

place where He manifested His presence between the golden cherubim that graced the ark's lid. Within the ark were the two tablets of Moses bearing the Ten Commandments, along with a pot of manna and Aaron's budded rod.

In I Samuel 4, more than 40 years before the event in our text, we read of the elders of Israel worried about a military defeat at the hand of the Philistines. They thought if they took the Ark of the Covenant into battle with them, they would prevail. But the opposite happened. They suffered a terrible defeat, and the dreaded Philistines captured the ark.

But what happened next you could see in a movie: the Philistines took the Ark of the Covenant of God and placed it in the temple of Dagon, one of the great gods of Philistia. They placed it right beside the tall statue of Dagon. On the next day when the priests of Dagon returned to the temple, they found the large statue on the ground face forward. They uprighted the statue, only to find on the morrow when they returned that it was face down again but with the head and hands severed. What followed was almost Hollywood-like: a terrible plague burst through the city and surrounding villages, a plague of tumors which broke out on people's bodies. Many people died.

Consequently, they decided to move the ark to another Philistine city called Gath. But the same thing happened: this plague of tumors broke out upon the people, so the city leaders of Gath decided they would send it down the road to another city, Ekron. But when the leaders of Ekron heard what Gath was planning to do, they called an emergency council meeting of the leaders of Philistia and said to them, "Send the Ark of the God of Israel away! Let it go back to its own place so it doesn't kill us and our people!"

So that is what they did. They devised a plan to send the ark back, a plan that was filled with superstition and paganism. The plan to appease the God of Israel was to put the ark on a brand new wooden ox cart with two milk cows that had never been yoked. If the cart bearing the ark would go back to Israel, they would know it was indeed God who had plagued them for having His property. But if the milk cows headed back for another city in Philistia, they would say it had all been a coincidence.

The two cows headed toward the border of Israel. Can you imagine the relief they felt that day as they saw the ark crest the hill out of sight, never to be seen by them again? Two Jewish farmers saw the strange sight, two milk cows pulling a wooden cart bearing the Ark of the Covenant. The excitement began to spread throughout the region at the news of the sacred artifact being returned that they led it to the nearest city. All was well until someone got the ill-fated idea to open the lid and peek on the inside to see what was there. What did happen probably did inspire the writers of the Indiana Jones movie. We read in I Samuel 6:19-20,

*Then He struck the men of Beth Shemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the LORD. He struck fifty thousand and seventy men of the people, and the people lamented because the LORD had struck the people with a great slaughter. And the men of Beth Shemesh said, "Who is able to*

*stand before this holy LORD God? And to whom shall it go up from us?"*

In other words, how do we get rid of this thing? The elders of Beth Shemesh, like the Philistines, decided to get some other town responsible for the Ark of the Covenant. They contacted the neighboring, Kirjath Jearim, to come and get the thing. They wouldn't dare touch it now, although they had been so bold to do so earlier. Men from Kirjath Jearim got the Ark and put it in the house of a man named, Abinadab, probably a Levite. His son, Eleazar, was consecrated to guard it. For forty or more years it there remained. This is the background behind the text.

## **Judgment of God**

Let me direct your attention to the judgment of God in our text. What happened that day and why? David wanted to bring the Ark to Jerusalem. A major event was planned to bring the Ark to the capital city. The Bible says early in the chapter of our text that David gathered all the choice men of Israel, 30,000, for a great parade. He planned a huge band of musicians to play along the parade route. They set the Ark on a new cart, and Abinadab's sons Uzzah and Ahio drove the cart. Along the way, almost to Jerusalem, one or both of the oxen stumbled. Of course, the Ark shifted, as we would expect. Hardly thinking, and fearing the safety of the Ark, Uzzah reached out his hand to steady it. The moment his hand came into contact with it, God put forth His hand and touched Uzzah and smote him. He died immediately. The text says, "Then the anger of the LORD was aroused against Uzzah, and God struck him there for his error; and he died there by the ark of God."

A scream shrieked slicing the jubilant air turning it rancid with fear. The king ran toward Uzzah but could quickly see nothing could be done to save him. He was gone. Within seconds, David's heart turned from worship to bitterness. The very God that he had been worshipping, he now wanted to curse.

Verse 8 says, "And David became angry because of the LORD's outbreak against Uzzah; and he called the name of the place Perez Uzzah to this day." That's an interesting name, Perez Uzzah. Interesting because in the preceding chapter, 2 Samuel 5:20 David had named another place, a place of victory, by a very similar name. "So David went to Baal Perazim, and David defeated them there; and he said, 'The LORD has broken through my enemies before me, like a breakthrough of water.' Therefore he called the name of that place Baal Perazim." The word *Parazim* is the same word that forms the first word, *Perez* in Perez Uzzah. God had broken upon David's enemies; now God had broken through on his friend.

Clearly, David didn't realize the importance of what had happened, at least not immediately. He didn't see God's actions as just or deserved. He could understand God breaking through and destroying his enemies, but not breaking in upon his friends. All Uzzah had done, he had done for the honor of God. Is this the way God repays? Have you ever felt that way? "God, I'm trying to live for You! I'm trying to serve You! Is this the way You acknowledge the service of Your people? The more I seem to dedicate my life to You, the more difficult my life gets!" Uzzah, out of love

for the ark, tried to prevent it from falling and being damaged. Is this the way a man is rewarded for his troubles? He gets killed?

Here we are again at the same place: utterly, thoroughly confused by the judgment of God, because we expect blessing instead of judgment. That's why we're often surprised by God's chastening in our lives, because we often expect something different of God. How do you keep from an attitude that says, "God, I am doing this! I am serving you; surely you should bless me for this"? That is a dangerous, deadly attitude. Just ask Uzzah. God does not owe me anything because I am His servant. In the end, I am an unprofitable servant, simply doing what I am told to do. I don't even deserve a "thank you." Isn't it amazing that in all of the New Testament, we never hear of God saying "thank you"? He says, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant," but never "thank you." Why? Because God thanks no one. You ought to thank Him for the privilege of serving Him.

We're just baffled by this God who takes a man who is trying to help, and strikes him dead. We're baffled because our hearts are wrong. We are thoroughly accustomed to grace that we consider grace owed to us, and we are completely astonished that the justice would be deserved. What, really, was Uzzah's crime that he should be instantly smitten by God? As I proceed to my final point, we will learn.

## **The Crimes of David**

David was not blameless in this story. His culpability is seen in his own actions and remarks. In verse 9 his anger turned quickly to fear: "David was afraid of the LORD that day; and he said, 'How can the ark of the LORD come to me?'" He turns from anger, thinking it was not right what God did to Uzzah, to fear that he would never be able to bring the Ark to Jerusalem. Which means that sometime that very day David realized that what God had done was just and that he too should have been killed. He acknowledged that he was no different than Uzzah and that he deserved God to break out upon him.

What changed David? You'd be surprised if I said I think it was simply because he understood that what God did was an act of God's holiness. Throughout that day as he pondered on this, God began to show him that God was defending His own honor. David then cites his own failure and the failure of the Levitical leaders. Two actual transgressions happen before Uzzah touches the ark. To see this, we must view a parallel passage that shows this event, 1 Chronicles 15. David explains what were the failures of the first attempt to bring the ark to Jerusalem. Beginning in verse 2, the Bible says, "Then David said, 'No one may carry the ark of God but the Levites, for the LORD has chosen them to carry the ark of God and to minister before Him forever.'" In verses 12 and 13, David continues to the Levitical leaders:

*You are the heads of the fathers' houses of the Levites; sanctify yourselves, you and your brethren, that you may bring up the ark of the LORD God of Israel to the place I have prepared for it. For because you did not do it the first time, the LORD our God broke out against us, because we did not consult Him about the proper order.*

Before David tried to move the ark the second time, he got wise and consulted the word of God, and he discovered that the Levites had not performed their task of carrying the Ark of the Covenant. You see, God had strictly instructed Moses that the ark was not to be carried by mechanical means. It was made with rings attached to the sides so golden rods could be set into the rings and the ark borne on the shoulders of the Levites chosen to carry it. That was their only job; to carry the ark, and they had not done it.

The second sin is right here as well in I Chronicles 15:13, and David includes himself: they had failed to consult God about the right way to transport the ark. If you don't know what to do, then prayer and the Scriptures ought to be the first resource. But it hadn't been for David or the Levitical leaders. Uzzah's sin was the result of these two previous crimes. Had David and the Levitical leaders consulted the word of God and done this properly, Uzzah would not have felt the need to steady the ark. He could have enjoyed the day along with everybody else.

## **Worldliness**

I want to deal with two sins I feel are at the root of all of this. First, worldliness. Let us look at David and the Levitical elders and their hearts, and then I will discuss Uzzah's heart and his crime. Four hundred years had passed since Moses had recorded the law of the Levites and the ark. Through the centuries, many of the laws regarding worship had been lost to the people. Israel had not celebrated the Passover since the days of Joshua. Many of their traditions and laws had been simply forgotten or lost. There wasn't any Bible; this was even before the days of scribes, or men who were employed to do nothing but to copy the Scriptures. There were very few copies of the word of God. Therefore, the people for a lack of knowledge had overlooked the traditions and laws of God.

It had been a generation since the ark had been at the center of Israel's attention. When it was decided to move the ark, the people had no clue what to do. The older folks could remember as young people that the last time they had seen it moved, it was moved by a wooden ox cart and a couple of oxen that had never been yoked. That's all they knew – and that is what the Philistines had done.

So what did they do? They blindly followed the way of the pagans. David and his leaders imitated the world instead of consulting Scripture; they adopted the methods of the ungodly. They simply did what they had seen the pagans do. I think this is so important that I need to exercise some caution with you.

Since the Pharisees, there have always been men who seem to have a special ability to see worldliness in everything, to the point that the only way you could escape being charged with worldliness is to escape the world. These people have the knack to see sin in almost everything. So I need to be careful, because I think there are truly holy people, who because they are true and holy and they love God, they have made some mistakes on the side of legalism rather than liberty. They love purity and hate sin, and they'd rather make the mistake of being maybe a little

too legalistic than to be too loose. I appreciate that and love that – maybe even a part of my heart is like that.

So I don't want to mischaracterize or malign any, but dear friend, when it comes to work and worship and the will of God, we must follow the Spirit of Christ and the express commands of Scripture. Call us legalistic if you want to; call us puritanical if you must, but as for me and my house, we shall serve the Lord – and we shall do so as He has instructed. We've got to resist the temptation to adopt the world's ways of approaching God, no matter how successful it might seem. That is true for the people of God, and it is true for the sinner who would be saved. If you want God to accept you, you have got to accept God's ways. Let us not follow the world's suggestions on how to approach God; you must follow God's express way. Surely a cart and oxen were a whole lot easier than a few men bearing the weight of a gold-plated box on their shoulder. Yes, it looked easier – the world's way always looks easier.

The world will always steer you away from Calvary. It will suggest an easier path than a straight one; a broad gate rather than a narrow gate. It will preach a much easier road to God than the strait road. It offers you a broad gate rather than a narrow gate that requires you to put off all things; for the gate is so narrow that you can take nothing with you; you must unload everything.

You may be tempted to follow the easy way, but Jesus warned it would lead to everlasting destruction. I can't say it more strongly; listen! You will perish! The world's way leads to everlasting destruction! Look at Uzzah and see your end.

Friend, whatever you may gain by following the ungodly is going to cost you much more when you stand before the Lord. Some of you are separated from God today and will not be saved because you will not separate yourself from the world. You want to please a few pagan friends, ungodly family members, and some blasphemers – you don't want their rejection. You're afraid of them. Let me ask you a question: can your friends or ungodly family members stop your beating heart and send you to hell? Of course they can't. God can. And He will. God is gracious and He is magnanimous in His offer of salvation – it is large, infinite, in scope and degree. But it is narrow in how you receive it. You must come His way.

Beware of the world's ways to God. How sad it is to see churches become so worldly and call it worship. Worldliness in the name of worship! Today, grunge is in – and glory is out. Looseness has replaced dignity; casualness has prevailed over carefulness. Sloppiness reigns over vigilance, and entertainment has unseated biblical joy so the world doesn't even know the difference anymore. "As long as we're having fun, isn't that what it's all about?" The more like the pagans we become, the more evangelistic we think we are.

That is what is happening, friends, even in our own city. New churches are cropping up everywhere almost monthly, all based on an idea of being like the world so we can reach the world. It's nothing more than wooden ox carts. The more a sinner can feel comfortable and enjoy the service, the better we feel about our worship services. Please don't misunderstand me – there's

nothing holy about dressing up. It's not more righteous to wear a dress than blue jeans. There's no more godliness in a tie than an open collar; cuff links than T-shirts. It's all the same. I do wonder, though, that if our casual dress is indicative of a casual heart toward God? I'm not judging holiness by clothing – when you judge godliness by appearance, you have a wooden cart; it doesn't matter which way you go. You can wear black and cover your head, and you've gone the other route; you're still judging godliness by what you wear. That's an ox cart.

Godliness is not a wooden cart, or clothing. Do you know what godliness really is? It is a prevailing attitude that believes God is to be so distinguished from everything. It is an attitude of mind and heart that says it's my business to show the world that my God is not like all of us; He is so high and holy, so lifted up, that nothing or no one, not even the godliest of saints, is really like Him. It honors Him by approaching Him with godly fear and holy respect. It is to treat Him better than you treat anyone else. Godliness is to be careful about your heart! Laissez faire isn't Christian liberty, nor is it spiritual. It is unholiness to the Lord. Spiritual liberty is to realize that I approach God not by my own merits or works, but by the merit and the work of Jesus Christ. That is what will set you free!

When will you understand that Christian liberty is not liberty to sin or be like the world, but it is a liberty to set you free from the world and from sin so that you can walk the narrow way and the straight path? The liberty of the Spirit sets you free so that you can worship free of the world, free of sin. It gives you freedom to be able to set the Lord apart and to be able to demonstrate to the world that wooden carts do not say God is holy, but instead carefully obeying His instructions. How is the world to know that our God is holy if we try to be like them? We need to live and worship in such a way that we say to our loved ones, our children, our neighbors, our co-workers – God is not like you; He's not like me; He's so much better!

Isn't it possible that our aim at trying to be like the world so that the world will want to be like us declares that our God is not so different from us all? Are we really showing them that He is holy? Shouldn't our speech, decorum and demeanor say that the Lord God is frightenly awesome? That He is so above us in beauty, excellence and worth that He is terrifyingly great?

For example, how does the wife of an unsaved man live in such a way in that man's presence that he trembles because of the God that he sees in her? What would you say to such a woman – would you tell her to wear dresses all day long? Would you tell her to have her husband's favorite beverage waiting for him and his favorite meal prepared when he arrives home? Is that how you would tell her to show that God is holy?

Or would you say what Peter said – to let not your holiness be in how you are outwardly adorned but be of the inward heart, in quiet submission, so by that he is convicted of all and by God? Interesting, isn't it?

We will never tell the world about Jesus Christ by trying to imitate them. It is by showing them that He is altogether different. "Be ye holy as I am holy." That's the mandate for us as believers,

that we are to live in such a way that says, “God is holy.”

I read just this morning, I think not incidentally but for this very sacred moment, of a letter that Robert Murray McCheyne got after he preached his very last sermon. McCheyne was a Scottish pastor whom God blessed to see great revival in his church and region; he died at 29. The letter was from one who had heard him that day, and it relayed how God had saved the hearer that day, but not by the content of the sermon. Instead, the writer said, “I saw the glory of the Savior resting on you, and my heart trembled.”

We often worry about evangelistic techniques: saying the right thing, doing it the right way. Friend you’re dealing with ox carts! Be ye holy, and they’ll ask you to tell them about the gospel.

## **Uzzah’s Crime**

My final point is about Uzzah’s sin itself. Familiarity with the Holy is dangerous. Uzzah was most likely a Levite – we don’t know, the Bible doesn’t say, but it seems they would have put the Ark of the Covenant in a man’s home who was a Levite. But one thing he did know was that he was not supposed to touch the ark. It had been in his home for 40 years and not one of his family members had touched it, for if they had, you know what would have happened. Why do you think they had Eleazar consecrated to guard the ark? To make sure no one touched it! One man couldn’t keep an army from stealing it; it wasn’t about that. It was to keep people at a distance from it. Uzzah knew that.

Why, then, did he touch it that day? Was it merely a reflexive action, or was there more to it? I think there was more to it. Consider this: a longstanding familiarity with something that is dangerous doesn’t remove the hazard, does it? What it usually does is it begins to work on you so you let your guard down and make unsafe presumptions. Haven’t you heard about men who work high voltage wires getting electrocuted by doing something they knew better than to do? Happens all the time. When I was in junior high, the father of one of my dearest friends was a high-voltage wireman and he was electrocuted when he made a very simple mistake. He had gotten familiar with that which was dangerous. It is not uncommon to hear of a wild animal trainer who has taken an infant ferocious animal and reared it, only to later be mauled and killed by that animal they loved. Familiarity with the dangerous is still dangerous! Augustine said familiarity breeds contempt; perhaps in some cases it does, but it will more often than not breed carelessness.

Watch two young people in love. They can’t stand to be away from each other! He always makes sure he’s got his best foot forward (and tries to keep it out of his mouth as best he can), and she always wants to be seen in best form – hair always fixed and fashionable, fingernails are clean and polished. He treats her with respect and she treats him with kindness. After the wedding, something happens. Carefulness is replaced by casualness. She looks like a war zone first thing in the morning, and she no longer sees him as a knight in shining armor. She is no longer careful, nor is he, of how they treat one another. They take each other for granted. Familiarity, if it doesn’t breed



contempt, will breed carelessness.

I think that is Uzzah's crime – he had become familiar with God. Familiarity with God is not a sin; I want to be more familiar with God. I want to draw nearer to the precious bleeding side that bled and died for me. But friend, I must avoid like the plague becoming careless or contemptuous in my familiarity with God. That is the danger we must fight.

Ask yourself if you pass or fail this test. Have you become so familiar with God that you have little to no fear of Him? How do you know? Simple – if you premeditate sin and rationalize, “God will forgive me,” then you don't fear God. It is the most hazardous place to be. Your heart has become full of sin. You have set your hand to the ark of God, Christ Jesus the Lord, and you have mishandled the glory of God. How? By treating that which is holy as commonplace, to such a degree that you could easily mistake it for contempt. When you take the holy Son of God and you treat Him commonly, it is as if Uzzah is putting his hand to the ark all over again.

If you no longer set Him up as high and holy; if He is not the object of your greatest respect; if you now consider His mercy to you a right and not an undeserved kindness, the sacred has become common. That is the prevalent sin of God's people today: this is where we are, we mishandle the sacredness of God because we are so familiar with Him. I plead today, let us repent of hearts filled with contempt. Let us regret our cold casualness toward our God. Can you not shed at least one tear for mishandling the sacred? Ask and pray for a boldness that fears not to come to God; for a grace that draws us near; for a holy fear that causes you to draw near rather than away from Him. May you and I live life so characterized by carefulness that people see in our face and countenance the face and the glory of the Son of God, and that glory smites them with a conviction that causes them to tremble that they would ask us, “What must I do to be saved?” Amen.