

# The Danger of God's Holiness

a sermon in the series  
The Holiness of God

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at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Paducah, Ky.  
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Leviticus 10:1-3

*Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. 2 So fire went out from the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the LORD. 3 And Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the LORD spoke, saying: 'By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; And before all the people I must be glorified.'" So Aaron held his peace.*

I want to avoid giving you any impression that our God is a volatile person with a very short fuse. You could get that impression by hearing some passages read like our text, or maybe for example when you read Exodus 22:24, "and My wrath will become hot, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives shall be widows and your children shall be orphans." Or what about when God said to Moses, "Therefore let me alone that my wrath may burn hot against them, that I may consume them."

Reading those kinds of passages gives you the impression that our God is a hothead. But He really isn't at all. The Bible says, "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger." He doesn't get angry very quickly. And he abounds in mercy. In most cases, God has a very long fuse – longer than anyone else I know. When He does get angry, He doesn't keep his anger very long. Psalm 30:5 "For His anger is but for a moment." Thankfully, it doesn't last!

There are times when the Lord's anger is kindled in but a moment's time. Our text is one of those examples. The two eldest sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, incited and incurred the wrath of God. In our text is a manifestation of the holiness of God. Because we all have issues with sin, you really need to take note of this text. Let us not make the mistake of relegating this as irrelevant to us simply because it is found in the Old Testament and before Calvary. I say again, Calvary did not reveal a new and improved God. The Lord did not remake Himself after Malachi and before Matthew.

An attribute of deity is *immutability*, a big word with an even bigger meaning. It means unchangeable. Every one of us can change and do change. Even the angels have the ability to change as stated last week. But the only person who cannot change in nature or temperament or in any other way is Jehovah God. Thus, if He is immutable then Calvary has not changed God's nature or temperament. He "is the same today, yesterday and forever." What happened to these two sons

of Aaron? What caused God to react like this? Let us pursue the answer by first directing your attention to the commandment they violated.

## **The Commandment Violated**

### **A Specified Incense**

First, let's look at this whole thing about burning incense in the tabernacle. God had specified to Moses that they were not to offer "strange" incense – it had to be to the specifications that God had given Moses. The ingredients included things like myrrh, cinnamon, fragrance of the calamus plant, and the cinnamon-like bark of the acacia tree. This was also used as the anointing oil. After that, it was prohibited for anything else – in fact, in Exodus 30:37, God commanded Moses to never allow the people to use this formula to make this incense for themselves; it was reserved for the Lord and it was to be treated as holy.

### **The Altar of Incense**

There was the altar of incense where all this occurred. The text says they used censers, which was a gold pan or plate with a chain attached to it. In the censer they put coals, then incense atop the coals to emit the fragrance. They would then take that gold censer and put it on the altar of incense. The altar of incense was an 18-inch square altar, about three feet high, overlaid with gold, with horns carved at the four corners. It was the last thing the high priest would pass as he entered through the veil to the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement once a year. This was an altar unlike any of the other altars around the tabernacle; no fire actually sat in the basin of the altar. No ash was to desecrate it. All of the coals and ashes were in the censers, so they could take coals from the brazen altar, put them in the censer, add the oil, and then lay it atop the altar of incense.

### **The Fire**

Then there was the infamous fire that is at the center of this story. The fire that was to burn the incense was to be taken from one place and one place only: you didn't light your Bic; you didn't strike a match. The fire was specified by God to come from one place: from the brazen altar where the sacrifices were offered just outside the tabernacle. Why there? Leviticus 9:23-24 gives us the answer:

*“Moses and Aaron went into the tabernacle of meeting and came out and blessed the people.” – (This was the day the tabernacle was completed and was dedicated) – “Then the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people, and fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar. When all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces.”*

The fire that was on the brazen altar was not man-made. It was supernatural. It had come from God Himself: God ignited the fire on the brazen altar, and He specified to Moses in Leviticus 6:13,

“a fire shall always be burning on the altar; it shall never go out.” The fire God gave that day was never to be extinguished. The priests were to keep it fueled with wood, so from that heavenly fire would come the fire to burn the incense and all the sacrifices that were offered. It was this law that Nadab and Abihu violated: they made their own fire.

Why is there an issue with this? Because God wants us to understand, in all of this imagery and rituals, one specific lesson: the fuel of worship is not man-made – it’s God-provided. That is the lesson. It goes all the way back to the Old Testament and it is true in the New Testament– all the fuel, motivation, and power of worship is never to be generated by us. It is heaven-sent. You and I can come here and worship and go through all the rituals, but unless fire comes down from Heaven above, it is abominable to God.

## **The Nature of Sin**

To really show what is going on here, let me unpack the nature of the sin of these two young men. This is the same issue experienced by King Uzziah, who wished to offer incense to God and grabbed the priest’s golden censer, and immediately God broke out on him with leprosy. Like Uzziah’s sin and punishment, we get a wee bit nervous thinking that God is this stickler over details. The reason we get nervous is because we are not sticklers or perfectionists about holy things. We’re alarmed by this image of God that this story seems to create for us; He seems to be hard to please and seemingly unfair. So you may think this doesn’t seem quite fair; the punishment doesn’t seem to fit the crime. What’s so special about fire? Fire is fire, isn’t it? Does it really matter where it comes from, as long as it gets the job done?

## **The Purpose of Worship**

According to Moses, speaking to his grieving brother Aaron in verse 3, it’s really not about getting the job done. It is about what the job is for. Why was the incense to be burned in the first place? What did all this symbolic effort prove? One thing: God is holy, and He is so holy that even your worship must show that He is holy.

Something about our worship service should show all of us God is holy. He is a friend, a companion, a lover of our soul and our person, but He is also holy. Look again at verse 3, and I think you will see the nature of Nadab and Abihu’s sin. “Moses said to Aaron, ‘This is what the Lord spoke, saying, “By those who come near me, I must be regarded as holy, and before all the people I must be glorified.”’” God’s stringent details about worship were for one distinct reason: to remind those who are worshipping that God is holy. Worship is designed to remind you and I that the God Whom we serve is holy. Secondly, that those who know us will know by us that God is holy. We see Nadab and Abihu did not regard God as holy when they did what they did.

If you really believe God is as holy as the Bible says He is, and that He is a stickler about holy things, you are more inclined to obey than to disobey. You revere Him so much that to disregard either command or promise is a fearful thing to you. I don’t think these two brothers forgot God

was holy; I think they simply refused to regard Him as holy. And they did that by not necessarily thinking that God had changed, but that they had changed.

There are at least two ways to disregard God's holiness: First, you do forget. It isn't that you forgot the data, but that you are not conscious throughout the day that you serve and live and breathe in the midst of a holy God, and you are tempted, and without any consciousness of a holy God, you sin. Had you remembered, you probably would not have sinned. The second way, the way Nadab and Abihu fell into, is probably the way of which most of us are guilty. They were the appointed priests of God, and their estimation of themselves had risen so dramatically that they literally believed they had become special. The end effect was that they disregarded and belittled God's holiness by elevating their own importance.

You don't have to forget that God is holy, or theologically disagree that God is holy. All you must do is elevate your own importance, and that alone disregards God's holiness. Just changing your opinion of yourself takes away from the holiness of God.

Worship must be so much more than just singing and praying in church. It is the entirety of your life lived in such a way that God is the One who gets the honor and the glory, and it somehow communicates to people around you that God is pure, and He is holy, unlike any of us. Your whole life should be saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts." Everything you do should be able to fly under the banner of holiness unto the Lord. As you work, your work should communicate to people who are observing that God is holy. As you study, your application should be saying to people that God is holy. The way you care for your family should say God is holy. Everything about your life should say, "Holy is the Lord."

The Lord has even instructed us in certain things we are to do, as far as acts of worship, in order to communicate this. He tells us to gather together with other believers to worship. He gives us ordinances like the Lord's Supper and baptism to communicate that He is holy. Worship is not to fulfill a need that God has, because God has no needs. Worship is designed for our benefit. It reminds us Whom we serve. Perhaps you have a downcast heart, but hear now of the glory of God, things unique to God. We can love one another, but no one can love as God loves. We can be forbearing and patient with one another, but no one can be forbearing and patient like God. This is something unique about God, and that is holiness. We are strengthened by that. Worship indicates what you value.

### **Worship Indicates What You Value**

This is another problem with the disobedience of Nadab and Abihu. It suggests that they no longer prize God. You worship and give honor to what you highly value. These two men valued, I think, their power and prestige, and their high ranking among the people. They were in the highest offices of the land, second only to Aaron and to Moses. Their own importance became their God, and that was what they were worshiping that day. When they took those censers and put strange coals and fire they had created, they were saying, "We are the most valuable ones, and it

is to our honor that we do this.” In their minds, they were too important to worry about details.

Remember what these two brothers, who had to have been at least 30 years of age according to law, had seen. A year earlier, they had seen the vengeance of God on the entire nation of Egypt with ten plagues and had been delivered by the power of God. They had seen a sea split and they passed through safely while Pharaoh’s army had been drowned. How could they forget that demonstration of God when in smoke, lightning, thunder and power He descended upon Mount Sinai, and they heard the very voice of God vibrate their souls as He spoke? Around forty days later, when Moses descended with the tablets of stone, they saw the wrath of God break out on the people as they worshipped the golden calf?

They even witnessed something far greater than that. Beginning in Exodus 24:9, we see Nadab and Abihu had been part of a delegation that had gone up on the mountain with Moses before the 40 days, and there they dined in the very presence of God.

*“Then Moses went up, also Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and they saw the God of Israel, and there was under His feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone, and it was like the very heavens in its clarity, but on the nobles of the children of Israel He did not lay His hand, so they saw God and they ate and drank.”*

God calls Nadab and Abihu noblemen. These two men should have known better. What could have happened to them? How do you explain this kind of nonchalant error? They mistook the grace of God – they misunderstood it and wrongly applied it to their lives in a way that was dangerous. They thought because of who they were they didn’t need to be careful about the holiness of God.

Christians must be very careful and listen closely. Nadab and Abihu’s father was Aaron, the first high priest of Israel, and their uncle was Moses, the man of God with whom God speaks face to face. Surely God would not penalize them for a little sloppiness in unconsciously burning incense? But He did. This is not just about worship in church. Worship is to characterize all of you, and God is concerned about every facet of you, that He declares His holiness. He is so concerned about every detail of your life that He counts the hairs of our heads. Not because He is interested in trivia or data that doesn’t matter, but because He is interested in you. Every molecule of your being somehow declares to the world, “God is holy.” It is not just about how you worship in church. Your life is to be the sweet incense of God. There is to be a burning of myself, my life, to God that is sweet to Him, and the fuel of that fire cannot be me – it must be Him. When I strive in the power of myself, I am as guilty as Nadab and Abihu. There is no other conclusion.

## **Favoritism**

The essence of their sin said something else. Their sin made it seem that God played favorites; He did have different standards for people. Their sin was they made God, Who is holy, to appear

not so holy, in that He didn't have the same standards for everyone. Young people, be very careful that you do not rise in the estimation of yourself because of the heritage you have. Just because your mom and dad may be Christians and God blesses them does not mean that God owes you anything. This is Nadab and Abihu's problem, and I think it is yours if you are not careful. God's holiness is not to be played with, trifled with, or bet against. You cannot see yourself special because you have a godly heritage and a godly home; the Lord doesn't have grandchildren! He only has sons and daughters! And He is only merciful to those who have a broken and contrite heart, whose estimation of themselves is not based upon what they do or to whom they are related. He shows mercy to the humble. You will never be saved as long as you see yourself as special. You will never be converted and become a Christian as long as you see yourself as deserving of such favor. The only one Who is special is the Lord Jesus Christ, Who would love somebody as arrogant as you and me. That takes someone of rare qualities. He alone is special.

Can a dandelion raise its pretty little yellow head and boast that it is more beautiful than the rose? Of course not. And neither should you boast in anything except the Lord Jesus Christ Who died on the cross for you. Your boast ought to be in the cross. Don't believe the devil's lie that salvation is owed to you, dear child – please, just because mom and dad or grandma and grandpa are Christians doesn't mean God will give it to you by right of progeny or heritage. I think the devil deceives more people by making them think they deserve God's love than he does any other way. The way he does that is by blinding you to the holiness of God. He doesn't want you to see God's wrath, but instead to think of God as this sweet man who is kind to everyone. He wants to hide the fact that this God is the same God of Leviticus 10.

Let me tell you about this "sweet man" – oh, He is sweet, sweeter than the honeycomb, but this sweet Man took a whip and drove the religious hypocrites out of the temple. Don't let your opinion of yourself rise above Who you belong to, or your knowledge of God, which Nadab and Abihu also did. They were the anointed ones, the chosen ones, who had even dined in the presence of God. Why, Moses was their uncle! Yet with all their knowledge, God still defended His holiness with fire, the same fire which Nadab and Abihu refused to use. At that moment, fire came from heaven a second time and burned them, left them lying on the ground charred, and the smoke of their burned bodies filled the tabernacle instead of the incense. That is ironic, isn't it? God will have His fire burn the incense and His alone.

Friend, God has claimed you. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. Your eye color, your hair, your height, your genes, your talents, your abilities – they are not of your own making. The Lord God gives them to you. What will you do with them? How will you honor Him with them? He will not be cheated! You will give an account of that which He has entrusted to you. "Be ye holy as I am holy." I wish to move lastly to what I think is our hope today. Holiness feared removes an attitude of deserving.

### **Holiness Feared Removes an Attitude of Deserving**

The only thing that can get rid of an attitude that thinks, "I deserve this and God will be there for

me when I need him,” is one thing: a fear of God by the holiness of God. When you remember that God is holy, that He is not to be trifled with or disregarded in the least, then you are careful. Some of you may be thinking this is a throwback sermon that paints God as a medieval torturer with a humongous axe, and He is just waiting to use it. No, that isn't it. Some of you may misinterpret what I am saying and think, “I had better be more careful with God, because I don't want that to happen to me,” and your whole motive is that you try to serve God to preserve and keep yourself safe. Friend, you are listening with an ear of misunderstanding.

The child of God is not terrified of his heavenly father because he doesn't know what kind of mood God is in. He is not terrified of God nor is he really all that conscious that God might fry him at any moment. Hardly that. The truth is, the child of God has seen the glory of God. It may not have been a bright light and a voice booming from heaven, and it may not have been fire, but he has seen something out of this world that can't be defined by anything in this world. He has seen the perfect purity of God; he has seen the righteousness of God, and all these things tell him he has no business in the presence of God.

You and I have no business in the presence of God. What you consider a luxury, to sit and enjoy what you have heard, is a grace. The child of God has seen the terror of God, and he knows he has no right to even call upon the name of God, much less speak it, except for one right and one alone: by Jesus Christ, the truly holy, perfect, pure One who died in our place on Calvary. That is his only right. The true child of God claims it and claims it much – Jesus Christ is his only right to be in the presence of God. It is that truth that makes his heart shudder with amazement, and yes, even bewilderment.

“How can it be that thou my God should die for me?” Such a man or woman has seen holiness, and it is their constant prayer that they never forget what they see. They don't want to miss that moment. Some of you hearing this message remember many times you have entered the presence of God or entered the sacred with little or no thought or reverence – I am talking to you. You have thought about your disregard of God's holiness because you have sinned this week. Because of what you have seen here, your heart has trembled, knowing God could have consumed you too with fire. You probably want to get on your knees to praise and thank Jesus that He didn't do it, because you know He could have – you have, like Nadab and Abihu, trifled with the holy.

Because of the great, overwhelming grace and mercy of God, sin can become so small. It is true that the holiness of God can swallow up the greatest of sin. His mercy is able to wipe you clean, thereby leaving you changed forever. But friends, sin doesn't change and God hasn't changed. I'm talking to the person who knows that this very week you have approached sin and let the fire of sin burn in your own bosom because you disregarded God's holiness. And the only reason you are not burned, lying with the smoke rising from your dead corpse is because of the mercy of God in Christ Jesus.

Recently someone told me of a respected person in our community – a good person, a profess-

ing Christian, a person who does things the best of Christians do. This person is faithful to church, reads the Bible, prays, and gives. Yet this person, when asked why they believed they would go to heaven, their response was because they *deserved* to go to heaven. When asked further and pressed, the person said those who go to hell are the bad ones who deserved to go to hell, and continued, "I don't deserve to go there." What is startling and remarkable about that answer is that Jesus is not in the reply whatsoever. That, to me, is incredulous and almost unbelievable from a professing Christian. We deserve to go to heaven?

This is the sin of Nadab and Abihu that brought judgment down upon their heads. I am telling you today as soberly as I can, the same judgment that destroyed those two young men will destroy any and all who think they deserve God's favor. Such hearts will be given over to the holiness of God, but not to salvation – to wrath. The fire of God's righteousness will burn yet again, but for these who see themselves as worthy of God's kindness. I don't relish this thought or wish that on anyone – I hope that those of you who think as this esteemed, yet deceived, person thinks will see God's holiness, and will repent of any worthiness of it. That is my goal for you.

I cry out to you, plead with you, to pour dust and ashes on your head, bow your head, smite your breast and say to God, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" God's mercy is granted to only those who feel unworthy of it, that they cannot so much as lift their eyes to heaven, but can be only constrained to say, "Mercy, mercy, mercy!" The holiness of God is dangerous, and He has not changed. It is only because of Jesus Christ that I can stand in the holy presence of God, by His righteousness and His alone. Amen.