

# An Introduction to Holiness

a sermon in the series  
The Holiness of God

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Exodus 15:11

*Who is like You, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like You, glorious in holiness, Fearful in praises, doing wonders?*

Something is dead wrong and immoral when we are stunned by the display of God's justice, and we are never surprised by His mercy. If you say that a national tragedy is a demonstration of the judgment of God on that nation, you would bring down upon your head the ire and indignation of that nation. I'm not just talking about ungodly and immoral people; many Christians have an aversion to the subject of the holiness and the justice and the wrath of God. All these themes are interwoven.

We get incensed when you suggest that the Lord might be judging somebody. How would you feel if you were at a funeral and the presiding minister declared that the deceased was taken from this world by an act of God's judicious preference (in other words, God killed him as an act of judgment)? Would something rise up on the inside of you and say, "How dare he do that? Not only is that insensitive and unsympathetic to the pain the loved ones are experiencing, it's just downright rude! Rude, I say!"

We're upset at the thought of God being anything but merciful. Much of Christendom is upset when you suggest that God still has a righteous temper and will display it from time to time; that He will dispense justice before that great and terrible day. In our minds we think God can be a judge, as long as it is on that final day when everybody stands before Him – that's OK – but until then, no. We've been programmed to think that isn't the way God operates.

The death of Jesus Christ did not remove all of God's displays of wrath and anger. Remember Ananias and Sapphira? I think we, dear saints, often are surprised by the revelation of God's judgment, and we seem to be complacent about God's many displays of mercy and grace. Something in us makes us absolutely shocked at any thought of God judging a person, a family, a church, or a nation, and it's equally true that we're hardly ever surprised by grace. I think we've come to see God to be only merciful and nothing else.

My question is, why are we that way? Mainly I think it's because we don't know or don't understand the holiness of God. We really don't understand what that means. And because we don't

understand the holiness of God, we don't fear God. There's very little fear in churches anymore. Look at what goes on at most churches today. We may mentally understand that God is holy; in our statement of faith, we can say God is holy; we can sing about it in hymns and choruses, but we really don't know what that means because we've seen so little of the holiness of God.

When was the last time you know God revealed Himself in His holiness, rather than just His grace, or love, or care? When was the last time you experienced the searing brightness of the holy presence of God? It's my prayer that this series on God's holiness will change that.

The goal of every message in this series is this: we will never again be surprised by God's justice but instead be astonished by His mercy. Exodus 15:11 will be the theme verse of our series. It gives us a great deal of understanding about the word holiness. But we will also look at other passages of scripture to shed some light on our theme text.

Let's focus our attention on Isaiah 6:1-8. This passage will take quite some time to adequately cover, but here I will deal basically with just the first phrase.

*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!" And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. So I said: "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts." Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; Your iniquity is taken away, And your sin purged." 8 Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: "Whom shall I send, And who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me" (Isaiah 6:1-8).*

Nothing quite like this had ever happened before. Jacob had had a dream where he saw a staircase with God standing there and angels ascending and descending, but Isaiah wasn't dreaming. God allowed Isaiah the ability to peer right into the very throne room of God.

Maybe the closest thing to this display of God's holiness is at Mount Sinai, when God came down on the mountain. That was such a powerful demonstration of God's holiness that Moses said, "I am exceedingly afraid and trembling." After the Sinai event, God would actually show Moses His glory – hiding him in the cleft of the rock, he saw the back part of God passing by. That was such a tremendous experience that Moses' face actually radiated with that glory, but it didn't frighten him. Sinai frightened him. Seeing God in the temple terrorized Isaiah – he said, "Woe is me, for I am undone!"

I want to direct your attention to the first few words of Isaiah 6:1. They're noteworthy because they're scene-setting words. "In the year that King Uzziah died..." Uzziah was one of the noblest

and best kings Israel had ever had. He was the second-longest reigning king, reigning 52 years. He was a godly man – a man that had a heart after God. Perhaps not since Solomon had one been used by God to bring such prosperity to Judah as Uzziah. The Bible says his fame spread far and wide. The empire of Judah grew, and its borders were enlarged as it was in the days of Solomon. He built up the infrastructure of Jerusalem, he made many improvements throughout the nation – building cities and improving agriculture. We are told he was not only a great administrator, but also a great military leader. Under his reign and leadership, the armies of Judah defeated and conquered many nations. But most important about Uzziah was this: he was a lover of God. He loved God and the things of God. In 2 Chronicles 26:4-5, it tells us, “And he did what was right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father Amaziah had done. He sought God in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding in the visions of God; and as long as he sought the LORD, God made him prosper.”

Isaiah was born and reared under this king; it was the only king Isaiah had ever known. He was aware that the king had been one of those national treasures that only comes along once every so often, and would be hard to replace (even though his son was now sitting on the throne). Now here he is in the temple, contemplating the death of Uzziah.

There was much good to say about Uzziah, except for one blot on his record. For at the height of Uzziah’s glory, the king presumed upon something that was not his to take. He might have been the king, but executive privilege did not extend to the ministry of a priest. Uzziah dared to enter, not into the Holy of Holies, but into the holy place of the temple reserved only for the priest. And he took the censer and he offered it up to the Lord God.

Now, kings before and after Uzziah had sinned – some very terrible sins. The chief sin of most of them was idolatry. Even David’s sin was not small: adultery and murder can’t be considered petty! But none of those kings before or after – especially the wicked kings who led the people in idolatry – none of them suffered the shame or pain of Uzziah’s punishment, for while the censer was in Uzziah’s hands, a white spot appeared on his forehead. Leprosy. God afflicted him with the most dreaded disease of his day, and the end of his life was a life of disgrace. The Bible says it in kind of a matter-of-fact way: “King Uzziah was a leper until the day of his death. He dwelt in an isolated house, because he was a leper; for he was cut off from the house of the LORD.”

Here’s a man that wanted nothing more than to get close to God – so much so that a passion overtook his heart; a zeal for God that rendered his judgment suspended momentarily. For he dared to rush in and do what was not for him to do: offer up worship as a priest.

Now here is Isaiah in the very place where Uzziah grabbed the priest’s censer and God struck him with leprosy. And the prophet-priest knows that shameful, terrible, hard, ominous days are coming. He is bewildered by all of this. The king that he loved was gone, and I don’t think I’m speculating when I say that he didn’t feel that the punishment of Uzziah fit the crime. I think he is grappling with this. How could the Lord have been so harsh with such a good man who had done so much good, and who loved God so much? All that the monarch did in that temple was

an act of worship! Why had God been so severe with him?

I want us to look for a few moments at Isaiah's dilemma. Why was the sin of Uzziah visited with such swift and severe wrath? Some of the kings, as I said, led the people into idolatry, even offering their own children to the sacrificial fires of the idols! All Uzziah wanted to do was draw closer to the Lord: he wanted the privilege of offering worship to God. Why, then, would God so sternly judge that man and let wicked kings go with hardly any suffering?

Under another dispensation, Uzziah would have been applauded as a religious reformer! Think about it: after the death of Jesus, if a Jewish king went into the temple and did that, trying to show the access to God was open to anyone and not just priests, we would have famously applauded him! He would be seen as a reformer right up there with Luther and Wycliffe. We would have talked about him with words as glowing as we use to describe the apostle Paul. What makes the difference here? What makes his storming into the sanctuary so bad?

One thing and only one thing. Don't miss this: you could very well do the same thing. Uzziah's problem was that he knowingly failed to acknowledge the holiness of God. Instead of Uzziah's act being holy worship, it was a defiant transgression against the infinite holiness of God.

Why? Because he dared to enter into the presence of God by his own righteousness: that's why. What Uzziah did was to dare to say that anybody can waltz into the presence of God; you don't have to be there by right or according to the code or regulation that God has prescribed: you can take upon yourself the duty reserved only for the sanctified, and you can enter into the presence of God. So in essence, Uzziah's sin is that he did not fear God.

Let me put it this way: Uzziah became too familiar with God. How can that be so? "Well, it's under the old covenant," we may think. "Sure, he couldn't do it because he wasn't a priest." Friend, don't relegate the sin of familiarity with God to an Old Testament time period. I think we've become too familiar with God also – it's always a danger. The longer you know about God, the greater the danger of taking Him for granted and forgetting the nature of the marvelous grace by which you have access. No man can presume to go into God's holy presence.

I'd rather you come here fearful to sing to Him and pray to Him and listen to His word than to come gleefully slothful, haphazardly, nonchalantly, flippantly, even though you might sing with great gusto and pray loud prayers. I'd rather you be timid in the presence of God than to be casual. But you have me to tell you this. How could this despondent prophet Isaiah have known all of this that day? With the king that he loved having now gone to the ages, how could he have seen all that I just shared with you? Remember, we have the advantage of history and of the New Testament scriptures.

Besides that, I think Isaiah was just like us – a man – and therefore he suffered from the same affliction that you and I suffer from: the affliction of relativism. We have a problem of seeing sin as relative. One sin can seem worse than another sin. Oh, some sins are worse than others; a brutal

murder is much worse than telling a lie. However, our relativism is based upon our sense of justice and fairness. But there is one problem with that: we're all sinners! Our sense of justice and fairness has been skewed and corrupted! It's like having a band of thieves write laws on stealing. Shall you and I determine justice and fairness for God?

Remember Robin Hood and his merry men? They didn't see robbing the rich and giving to the poor was immoral; they thought it was virtuous. That's what relativism does: we begin to categorize our sins, and you can categorize your sins so low on the totem pole that you're not bothered by them. That's the danger of categorizing sin.

Mournful Isaiah was trying to understand all this, but he really couldn't (and we barely do). There was only one thing that would aid this man to make sense of all about Uzziah and what was going on; only one thing to cure him of his relativism, and dear friend, it's the only thing that will cure us. It's seeing God in his holiness.

Isaiah's dilemma is not really so different from your dilemma in approaching God. Even though I've explained to you why God was angry with Uzziah – isn't there a part of you, something inside of you saying, "But I still don't think that was fair"? Isn't there something about you that says Uzziah's sin certainly isn't as bad as King Manasseh's sin? What was Manasseh's sin? There were many – including offering his own children up to the idol Molech.

But one of his great sins was taking the prophet Isaiah, putting him in a hollow log, and sawing the log and Isaiah in two! And yet Manasseh was shown much grace and mercy, and by the end of his life, he repents. I think we'll see Manasseh in heaven. Uzziah was stricken with leprosy, and banished from the temple, and from the people, and from the throne for wanting to worship.

Doesn't that get under your skin and make you think, "That just doesn't feel right." We have the same problem that Isaiah had. And if you don't think that's so, let me ask you some more questions.

Why is it that you can excuse certain sins you commit? You don't see them as sins when the Bible clearly, unequivocally says they are sins. For example, you can watch men and women on your televisions do things you would not do, but you watch them and call it entertainment. How is that so? Why are you, like Isaiah, puzzled over God's judgment, seeing it as unfair, unreasonable, too strict? Why are you getting uncomfortable right now by my questions? Why does grace not move your heart to tears? Why is grace commonplace? Brother, why is God's mercy something you expect and not something you're bewildered by? Why aren't you expecting God's judgment on your sin? Doesn't He say, "Those whom I love I chasten"? So why is it when God disciplines us we begin to say, "This is not fair!" It's because you expect grace. You don't expect discipline.

Our problem is that we're just not convinced of the surpassing holiness of God. We really don't believe He's all that holy. Somehow we think the death of Jesus has somehow swept the attribute of holiness under the eternal rug. We don't know what the words "God is holy" really mean.

Dr. Michael Horton in his book *No Place for Truth* writes this: “Divorced from the holiness of God, sin is merely self-defeating behavior or a breach in etiquette. Divorced from the holiness of God, grace is merely empty rhetoric, pious window-dressing for the modern technique by which sinners work out their own salvation.” In other words, Horton is saying without the standard of God’s holiness, sin is no big deal, and grace is no big deal either. The love of God is the virtue that we exalt, and holiness is relegated to the back of the bus. Without holiness, grace is not that important.

He goes on to write: “Divorced from the holiness of God, our gospel becomes indistinguishable from any of a host of alternative self-help doctrines.” That is why in churches across America, people claiming to be evangelical are doing all sorts of things and calling it the gospel. They have divorced themselves from the holiness of God.

“Divorced from the holiness of God,” Horton continues, “our public morality is reduced to a little more than an accumulation of trade-offs between competing private interests. Divorced from the holiness of God, our worship becomes mere entertainment.” The only thing that can keep our worship from regressing to entertainment and fleshly pleasure is the holiness of God. Otherwise, we are just singing songs to our own pleasure and enjoyment.

Lastly, Horton says, “The holiness of God is the very cornerstone of Christian faith, for it is the foundation of reality.” There is no gospel without the reality of God’s holiness. There’s no conviction of sin without the reality of God’s holiness. There are no right standards without the holiness of God.

So Isaiah’s dilemma is yours and my dilemma.

Isaiah didn’t grasp the holiness of God. Thus, God in His mercy invades Isaiah’s space. That’s what I need; can I dare to say it for you too? It’s what you need – you need God to invade your space.

When God did it for Isaiah, the Holy of Holies was no longer a place; it was a person, sitting on a throne. And the skirt of his robe filled every empty space in that room, draping over the furniture. Isaiah saw creatures he had never seen before: six-winged angels who did nothing but cry, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!” The timbre of their harmonic voices reverberated and shook the pillars of the temple. The room began to fill with a cloud of smoke – and if it was smoke there had to be fire. In my imagination, the fire had to be the glowing, burning righteousness of God Himself. The purity and beauty of He who sat on that throne burned, and the room filled with smoke.

At that moment, Isaiah got it. He saw it all. There were no more questions for Isaiah, except one: Will I survive this? Am I next to receive the judgment of God? Am I going to end up like Uzziah, a leper, or will they carry me out of here dead? He shouldn’t have been there, but he was, caught with no place to go. So he cries, “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I *am* a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.” Do you realize what he’s saying there? He

doesn't distinguish himself from any other sinner. Sin was no longer relative.

That's what I need – I don't need to point fingers at other people and say, "Boy, that is bad." I need to be so aware of the holiness of God that my finger is pointed at me and I cannot but say, as Isaiah, "Woe is me, for I am undone; I am a man of unclean lips." No more relativism. No more categorizing sin so that I can say, "Mine's not too bad; I've got this one under control." No. He had seen the Pure One and realized that all sin is incriminating. And dear friend, your sin incriminates you; I don't care how small you think it to be. Sin is rightly repulsive to the Sovereign One who sits on the same throne that Isaiah saw. That's what he understood that moment. Any sin is repulsive to God. He is so infinitely pure that the least of sins repulses and sickens Him. How could Isaiah survive this? I can understand why he's thinking this way. He, too, was guilty. Uzziah didn't have anything on him. Isaiah was a prophet, but that didn't matter now. He felt hopelessly and rightly condemned.

I don't know what some of you who are unsaved think about what salvation means. I can't dare to think I could know your heart or mind. But the way to Jesus Christ is not a way of ease, a yellow brick road with daisies littering the way, where you follow a path to more prosperity, happiness, and a more secure life. The way to God is first a way of humiliation – a hopeless in self and rightful condemnation for your sin. It is not until you see your sin as enough to send you to a thousand hells, that you are on your way to knowing God.

It was the presence of the Holy One who sat on the throne that had done its work with Isaiah, and I pray He does it for you. God is so holy that what we call the least of sins has no right to survive in His presence. Just like a germ can ruin a sterile laboratory, not one of your sins can be tolerated in the presence of holiness. One of my concerns is that we not make the same mistake that so many others have made. I don't want you to make the mistake of rationalizing, reasoning that because God has proclaimed you holy through the death of Jesus Christ that you do not have to be concerned about pursuing holiness. That's a danger, and many have fallen into that trap and have been ruined. I believe this is the reason for this series: Just because I have been saved and washed in the blood of Jesus and because of Him declared righteous does not mean that I do not need to pursue holiness. I can't let anything affect my desire to be holy.

My only hope for us is in God's mercy – that He display His holiness to each one of you, and to me, so the posts of our hearts quake with the fear of God. I want us to become afraid of God. You don't like that language, I know you don't, but I hope you are going to cherish it. I hope you will applaud it before the series is done because it is your only hope to true peace! The lesson of Uzziah should cause you and me to tremble; it's a terrible thing to lose the fear of God! Uzziah lost the fear of God.

Do you know what the opposite of holy fear is? The opposite of holy fear is pride and arrogance. It is a willful presumption to believe that whatever you do is OK with the Lord because, well, it's you. "It's me, Lord, and I'm yours!" It is a willful presumption to take sin lightly. It's to take license with the grace of God and say holiness is not a concern now.

You know you're not afraid of God when a brother or sister, out of love, cares enough to reprove you of your sins, and your only rebuttal is that you're under grace and not under law. Many of you may be thinking this sounds like legalism and nothing like grace: if so, you don't understand grace. Grace does not give me excuses to sin. How many times must we hear that before we will be fearful of our sin? What is wrong with us that we actually excuse ourselves because we presume upon the grace and kindness of God? Have we forgotten that He's so holy that even His love is holy? The love that He loves you with will not tolerate sin! Because He loves you He is going to burn – cauterize – the sins of your heart. Have you forgotten that?

Would you agree with me that there is still something defective with our love for holiness if we would rather be worldly than holy? Something is amiss if I can so easily excuse my sin and be so terribly surprised that God rebukes me for it! Why am I more inclined to indulge my flesh so long as I can maintain my Christian image? Some of you are doing that! You indulge your flesh with certain things that won't mar your Christian image, but it's still sin! Just because other Christians may find it socially acceptable doesn't make it any less pleasing to God.

This is not about legalism. It's really all about love. Do you love Jesus enough to want to be in His presence, knowing that to be in His presence requires a heart of purity? "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8).

Perhaps the reason you're not burdened to root out every evil desire is because grace is commonplace to you. Isaiah left that day stunned that he was even able to escape alive and unharmed. He knew he deserved the wrath of God, and yet he was astonished by mercy. He came to the temple that day thinking he was an OK guy – "I'm a prophet, I'm righteous, I'm holy." He left the temple humbled by the knowledge that there was only One holy, only One truly righteous. It would be the same Isaiah who years later would write, "But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags" (Is. 64:6). Where do you think he got that? He understood it from this day, when he saw the holiness of God.

Dear friend, it is my deepest hope that as you read or listen to this series you will experience a profound transformation causing judgment to be expected and grace to become an astonishing work. Amen.