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Gospel of John #36
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Sermon Summary #36

Holy, Holy, Holy! John 12:37-43; Isaiah 6:1-10

There was an old and godly man named Simeon who would often linger in the Temple in Jerusalem, because “it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ” (Luke 2:26). When Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus to the Temple, along with the appropriate sacrifice, Simeon took him into his arms and blessed God.

It was a truly joyous occasion. Simeon declared that he could now die in peace because he had seen with his own eyes the one who would bring salvation and revelation to both Jews and Gentiles. But Simeon then said something that was somber and disturbing. Not everyone, he said, would respond to Jesus with joy and in faith. Simeon spoke directly to Mary and said: “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed” (Luke 2:34).

For those of us who believe the truth about Jesus and the gospel of salvation that he has brought, it’s difficult to imagine anyone opposing him and remaining in unbelief. But just as Simeon had said, there were many in Israel who would “fall” in unbelief and judgment. Notwithstanding the many things Jesus would say and do, he would face intense opposition.

We see this vividly described here in John 12:37-43. These verses describe the end of our Lord’s public ministry. All that remains is his gathering with his disciples in the Upper Room, described in John 13-17, and his arrest, trial, death, and resurrection. And although Jesus performed numerous signs and wonders, such as healing a man born blind and raising another from the dead and supplying food sufficient to feed 20,000 men, women, and children, and healing a man who had been completely paralyzed for 38 years, people continued to defy and deny him (John 12:37).

You may recall that in John 1:11 the apostle told us that Jesus “came to his own, and his own people [i.e., the people of Israel] did not receive him. He elaborates on this in John 12:44-50, describing in terms that we’ve already seen in John’s gospel the rejection of him by the people and the judgment that awaits them.

Clearly, then, the fact that the majority of people remained in unbelief was not an accident of history. This did not catch God by surprise. It had been prophesied, not only here in John’s gospel but also in the OT, and in particular in the prophecy of Isaiah.

Notwithstanding the countless miracles he performed and the truth he proclaimed, “they still did not believe in him” (v. 37). And this was actually in fulfillment of what Isaiah had prophesied. First, in Isaiah 53:1, the prophet said, “Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” “Therefore,” as we see in v. 39, “they could not believe,” just as the prophet had prophesied in Isaiah 6 – “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them” (v. 40).

This hardening of their hearts and blinding of their eyes should not be taken to mean that these people wanted to believe and were prevented from doing so by God. No, they were already entrenched in their unbelief and their hard-hearted rejection of the Messiah and God now gives them over to their chosen ways and in judgment confirms them in their unbelief.

The fact that God had prophesied their unbelief and the judgment that would come does not diminish or destroy their moral responsibility. They are still guilty of rejecting Jesus. Although we may not be able to reconcile in our minds the sovereignty of God’s prophesied plan and the moral accountability of human beings, we know that no one is treated unfairly or unjustly and that all who reject Jesus do so because that is what they want and have chosen to do.

The Glory of the Pre-Incarnate Son of God

It is with v. 41 that we come across a statement that many fail to appreciate. And it is this statement that I want to unpack with you today. Notice what John writes:

“Isaiah said these things because he [Isaiah] saw his [Jesus Christ’s] glory and spoke of him” (John 12:41).

The experience of Isaiah that John mentions here is described in Isaiah 6, and to that we now turn our attention. Look with me at the text John has in mind:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for 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 burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” And he said, “Go, and say to this people: “‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed” (Isaiah 6:1-10).

If you asked most Christians, “whose glory did Isaiah see?” or “who is the Lord of hosts whose glory fills the earth, before whom the seraphim bow in adoration?” they would say: “That’s easy. It is God the Father. It is Yahweh, God of Israel.” But John tells us in John 12:41 that it was the glory of Jesus Christ, or better still the glory of the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God!

Are you beginning to feel the weight of what unbelief and hard-hearted defiance of Jesus Christ mean? Are you beginning to understand why rejection of Jesus is so severe and deserving of eternal condemnation? It is because Jesus is the glory of God in human flesh! Jesus is the Lord whose glory, said Isaiah, fills the earth. Rejecting Jesus is no small thing. It is the most serious and consequential sin anyone can commit.

Holiness

The word “holiness” means different things to different people. Have you ever considered how frequently and flippantly we use the word *holy*? We say *holy Moses*, *holy cow*, *holy moly*, *holy mackerel*, *holy Toledo*, *holy smoke*, and *holy roller*, just to mention a few. It should come as no surprise to us that people are singularly unimpressed when the Bible talks about God as being *holy*.

So, what does it mean to say that God is holy? Most people think of moral rectitude or righteousness or goodness, and that is certainly true. To be holy is to be characterized by purity and blamelessness and integrity, both in terms of one’s essence and one’s activity. In this sense, God’s holiness and his righteousness are somewhat synonymous. He is described in the OT as “of purer eyes than to see evil” and “too pure to behold evil.” The prophet Habakkuk said he “cannot look at wrong” (Hab. 1:13). But this is only a secondary way in which God is said to be holy. We need to understand the primary thrust of the word.

God is regularly identified in Scripture as “*the Holy One*” (see Job 6:10; Isa. 40:25; 43:15; Ezek. 39:7; Hosea 11:9; Hab. 1:12; 3:3). He is also called “*the Holy One of Israel*” in 2 Kings 19:22; Isa. 1:4; 43:3 (a total of 25x in Isaiah alone); Jer. 50:29; 51:5; and elsewhere. In Isaiah 57:15 God is described as “the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy” (Isa. 57:15). God’s holiness is often associated with his majesty, sovereignty, and awesome power (Ex. 15:11-12; 19:10-25; Is. 6:1-4).

Holiness is so much the essence of who God is that Amos speaks of him as swearing “by his holiness” (4:2). This is simply another way of saying that “the Lord God has sworn *by himself*” (6:8). In fact, ***God’s name is qualified by the adjective “holy” in the OT more often than all other qualities or attributes combined!***

The root meaning of the Hebrew noun “holiness” (*qodes*) and the adjective “holy” (*qados*) comes from a word that means “to cut” or “to separate.” The Greek equivalent is *hagios* and its derivatives. The point is that God is separate from everyone and everything else. He alone is Creator. He is altogether and wholly other, both in his character and his deeds. He is ***transcendently different from and greater*** than all his creatures in every conceivable respect. To put it in common terms, God is in a class all by himself!

We often speak of something that is outstanding or has superior excellence as being “a cut above” the rest. That is what God is, to an infinite degree. Holiness, then, is not primarily a reference to moral or ethical purity. It is a reference to transcendence. So, where does the concept of purity come from? R. C. Sproul explains:

“We are so accustomed to equating holiness with purity or ethical perfection that we look for the idea when the word *holy* appears. When things are made holy, when they are consecrated, they are set apart unto purity. They are to be used in a pure way. They are to reflect purity as well as simply apartness. Purity is not excluded from the idea of the holy; it is contained within it. But the point we must remember is that the idea of the holy is never exhausted by the idea of purity. It includes purity but is much more than that. It is purity and transcendence. It is a *transcendent purity*” (*Holiness of God*, 57).

Holiness, then, is that in virtue of which God alone is God alone. Holiness is moral majesty.

There is an interesting paradox in the title for God, “Holy One of Israel.” The words “Holy One” point to God’s otherness, his “set-apartness”, so to speak. As we shall see, to be holy is to be transcendently above the creation. Yet, he is the Holy One “*of Israel*”! The Holy One has given himself to an *unholy* people. They are his people and he is their God. Although transcendent and lofty, he is also immanent and loving. His eternal distinctiveness as God does not prohibit or inhibit him from drawing near in grace and mercy to those with whom he is in covenant relationship. Let’s go back for a moment to Isaiah 57 and look at the entirety of v. 15,

“For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite” (Isa. 57:15).

We hear that God is “high and lifted up” while we are low and cast down. We hear that God “inhabits eternity” and we are but creatures of time and decay and death. We hear this and we conclude that there is no way we could ever have a relationship with this God. He is too high and we are too low. He is eternal and we are temporal. He is righteous and we are sinful. But that is when God himself declares, “Yes, I am infinitely and immeasurably above and beyond you, but I have chosen in grace, mercy, and love to dwell with those who are contrite and humble and lowly, and I do so in order to revive and restore your hearts!” Does it sound too good to be true. Here it is again in Isaiah 66,

“Thus says the Lord: ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? . . . But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word’” (Isa. 66:1-2).

An Encounter with the Holiness of God

The encounter that Isaiah (6:1-8) the prophet had with the majestic holiness of God is more instructive than any in Scripture. A careful reading of this passage will show that Isaiah saw three things: the Lord, the angels, and himself.

Isaiah sees the Lord

We are told in v. 1 that he saw “the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up’ with the train of his robe filled the temple.” I don’t know what Isaiah meant when he said he “saw” the Lord. Did he “see” God in the same way you see me right now? Did he experience a vision or a trance? Also, how do you “see” what is invisible? God is spirit. God has no body, at least not until the time that the Second Person of the Trinity took on flesh as Jesus of Nazareth. In John 12:41 we read that he saw the Lord’s “glory.” Was this a literally visible manifestation of God’s transcendent brilliance, a display of what the OT calls the “shekinah” glory of God? In the final analysis, we don’t know. But that shouldn’t keep us from digging further into the text.

The word “Lord” here is usually printed in our Bibles as “Lord” as over against “LORD”. The former is a translation of the word *Adonai* which means “the sovereign one.” The latter is a translation of *Yahweh* which is the most sacred name of God, the name by which he reveals himself to his covenant people.

The name *Jehovah* is not technically a biblical one. It comes from the consonants in *Yahweh* and the vowels in *Adonai* to create “Jehovah”. For example, we read in Psalm 8:1 – “O LORD [*Yahweh*] our Lord [*Adonai*], how majestic is your name in all the earth.” *LORD* is the name of God while *Lord* is his title.

King Uzziah, one of the more godly kings who ruled Judah, died in @ 740 b.c. (see 2 Kings 15:1-7; 2 Chron. 26). He ascended the throne at the age of 16 and ruled for fifty-two years. One king was dead, but Isaiah was about to make contact with the King who never dies. One king had lost his power. Another never will. One king, Uzziah, has seen his authority pass to the next generation. Another will rule from generation to generation. An earthly nation mourns the passing of its monarch. A heavenly nation praises the perpetuity of its monarch's reign. Uzziah's power was limited and fleeting. God's power is limitless and forever. Needless to say, the contrasts in v. 1 are striking.

Isaiah sees the Angels

Secondly, Isaiah sees the angels (vv. 2-4). This is the only place in Scripture where the *seraphim* are mentioned. The word literally means, “burning ones”. Do they “burn” because of their proximity to God? Perhaps. In other words, does their “burning” reflect their own holiness that comes from having been created by the Holy One of Israel?

Observe what is said about their *posture* and their *praise*. As for their *posture* (v. 2), they covered their faces and eyes, for even among the angels it is forbidden to gaze directly at the glory of God. As Alec Motyer put it, “They covered their eyes, not their ears, for their task was to receive what the Lord would say, not to pry into what he is like” (76). They cover their feet, perhaps an allusion to Moses' experience of being on “holy ground.” Others have suggested it points to their humility. Or perhaps since it is our feet that connect us to the earth, they are symbolic of our creatureliness. Although angels are not earthbound or human, they acknowledge their status as mere creatures in the presence of the Creator. Thus “in covering their feet they disavowed any intention to choose their own path; their intent was to go only as the Lord commanded” (Motyer, 76).

As for their *praise* (vv. 3-4), they ascribe *holiness* unto the Lord. Holiness is the only attribute of God raised to the third power! Nowhere do we read, “Gracious, gracious, gracious,” or “Loving, loving, loving,” or “Powerful, powerful, powerful!” Some have argued that it implies triunity, one “holy” for each person of the Godhead. Most likely the *Trisagion*, as it has come to be known, is simply an example of a Hebrew literary device in which repetition is used for the sake of great emphasis (cf. Gen. 14:10; 2 Kings 25:15). Note several things.

(1) He is the Lord of “*hosts*,” a reference to his military role. God is the warrior who engages the enemies of his people. He stands at the head of a mighty heavenly host, an army of angelic powers against whom no one can stand. That certainly ought to inspire our confidence in his ability to fight our battles.

(2) Although God is holy and therefore transcendent, he is not remote. The infinite loftiness of God, implied by the reference to his holiness, does not entail his aloofness. God is great but he is not geographically distant. Observe the three-fold emphasis on fullness or God's “filling” the temple and the earth (vv. 1,3,4). This thrice-holy God is intimately near those who love him.

(3) The impact is shattering! There is trembling (cf. Ex. 19:18; Acts 4:31) and the presence of smoke (Isa. 4:5; Ex. 33:9). Not long ago a survey was taken among people who had abandoned the church. They simply stopped attending. When asked why, the overwhelming response was: “Because it was boring!” But as R. C. Sproul has said, “We note here, when God appeared in the temple, the doors and the thresholds were moved. The inert matter of doorposts, the inanimate thresholds, the wood and metal that could neither hear nor speak had the good sense to be moved by the presence of God” (40-41).

What is important to remember is that *we are now the temple of God!* If the inanimate structure of the old covenant trembled and shook at God's presence, what is *our* response, *we in whom* this same glorious and holy God now lives? How can there be the slightest indifference or coldness or routine or mere ritual or mindless habit in our worship when this same God lives and abides in us?

Isaiah sees Himself

Third, and finally, Isaiah sees himself (vv. 5-8). Seeing God does not produce rapture or giddiness or religious flippancy. It produces terror and self-loathing. Isaiah does not respond with pride or elitism, boasting that he alone has experienced this wonderful privilege. He is undone! He sees himself as insufferably unrighteous compared to the resplendent purity and transcendence of the King. We arrogantly measure sin solely in terms of its effects both within the created order and upon us. Isaiah, on the other hand, measures it by the majesty and purity of the One against whom it is perpetrated.

Isaiah's experience is instructive in another respect. This man was already aware of his sinfulness and had made great strides in his growth in spiritual things. But now, in the unmediated presence of the Holy God, he sees himself as filthier than ever before. So intensely aware is he of his sin that he, in effect, calls down the curse of God on his own head. “*Woe is me*” (v. 5) is a cry of judgment. It is a cry of anathema. Prophets would often call down the judgment and wrath of God on others, but here Isaiah calls it down upon himself.

This is no small twinge of a hyper-sensitive conscience. Isaiah cries out: “I am lost,” better translated, “I am *ruined*,” i.e., “I am coming apart at the seams! I am unraveling. I am experiencing personal disintegration!” Contrast this with the modern obsession with “personal wholeness,” “having it all together,” and being “integrated.” Says Sproul:

“If ever there was a man of integrity, it was Isaiah Ben Amoz. He was a whole man, a together type of a fellow. He was considered by his contemporaries as the most righteous man in the nation. He was respected as a paragon of virtue. Then he caught one sudden glimpse of a Holy God. In that single moment all of his self-esteem was shattered. In a brief second he was exposed, made naked beneath the gaze of the absolute standard of holiness. As long as Isaiah could compare himself to other mortals, he was able to sustain a lofty opinion of his own character. The instant he measured himself by the ultimate standard, he was destroyed – morally and spiritually annihilated. He was undone. He came apart. His sense of integrity collapsed” (43-4).

Surprisingly, his sudden sense of sinfulness and personal ruin were linked to his *lips*. He cried out, in essence, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because *I've got a dirty mouth!*” Why the focus on his mouth? I don't think there is any reason to conclude that Isaiah was guilty of profanity or told dirty jokes! Instead, there are two reasons for this conviction on his part. First, mention is made of his mouth because what we say betrays what we are. The mouth is like an old-fashioned phonograph speaker, it simply manifests what is impressed on the record of the heart (see Matt. 15:11,18 and James 3:2,6-12).

But more important still is the fact that the one area in his life which Isaiah thought he had under control, in which he no doubt prided himself, because of which the people honored and respected him, because of which he was highly esteemed, because of which he had position and prestige was the *power of his mouth*. He was a prophet! If there was one arena in his life of which he had no fear or concern, related to which he felt God's most overt approval, which he regarded as his greatest strength and that which was above reproach and beyond falling or failure . . . was his tongue! His speech! His mouth! His verbal ministry! He was God's mouthpiece, for heaven's sake! He was God's voice, his spokesman on the earth! Yet the first thing he felt was the sinfulness of his speech!

I am reminded of a statement by Oswald Chambers to the effect that “An unguarded strength is a double weakness.” Beware of that in your life which you regard as invulnerable to attack, failure, or demonic assault. What you regard as inviolable may well prove to be your greatest enemy.

At this point Isaiah must have felt hopeless. Every nerve and muscle and ligament in his body was trembling. He was groveling in the dirt. All he wanted to do was hide from the Holy One of Israel. Perhaps he hoped that the rocks would cover him or the ceiling of the temple would fall upon him. He couldn't hide and he had nothing with which to cover his spiritual and moral nakedness. This is what one commentator has called “pure moral anguish, the kind that rips out the heart of a man and tears his soul to pieces.” All he could see was his sin. All he could feel was his guilt.

If you have ever felt that way, and I often do, here is the good news of the gospel: The infinitely holy God is also a gracious and merciful God! This God of mercy immediately provides cleansing and forgiveness. Isaiah's wound was being cauterized. The dirt in his mouth was washed away as the corruption of his heart was forgiven. He was refined by holy fire. The fact that the coal was placed on his lips points to the principle that “God ministers to the sinner at the point of confessed need” (Motyer, 78).

So What?

The practical application we find here is profound: (1) Personal holiness begins with an awareness of who God is. (2) An awareness of who God is leads to an awareness of who we are. (3) An awareness of who we are leads to personal confession and repentance. (4) Repentance leads to forgiveness and cleansing. (5) Forgiveness leads to mission. Let me say just a few brief words on each of these.

We must never forget that ***personal transformation is the product, not so much of seeing the ugliness of sin as seeing the beauty of the Savior.*** Isaiah was awakened to the horror of his sin only because he saw the holiness of his God. Nothing on earth in the course of what must have been a full and fascinating life had ever awakened Isaiah to the presence and depth of his sin the way this experience did.

No teaching he had received, no exhortation from parent or friend or colleague, no warning about verbal sins, . . . nothing had brought him the quality of conviction that truly transforms. It was only when he saw the indescribably surpassing and incomparable character of God that his heart was stung with the anguish of conviction. Personal holiness thus begins with an awareness of who God is. Perhaps that's why so few people are or care to be holy: they've never “seen” God, which is to say they know little if anything of the magnitude of his holy majesty, his infinite, uncreated righteousness.

Awareness of who God is leads inevitably to an awareness of who we are. Self-image, the concept we have of ourselves, must begin not by looking in the mirror but by looking into the face of God. Few have expressed this more cogently than John Calvin (1509-64), who insisted that no one ever achieves

“a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself. For we always seem to ourselves righteous and upright and wise and holy – this pride is innate in all of us [even in Isaiah, I might add] – unless by clear proofs we stand convinced of our own unrighteousness, foulness, folly, and impurity. Moreover, we are not thus convinced if we look merely to ourselves and not also to the Lord, who is the sole standard by which this judgment must be measured” (*Institutes*, I:I:2).

This self-awareness in turn inevitably leads to brokenness and pain, followed by confession and repentance. One need only reflect on the emotional spiritual anguish of Isaiah. His physical agony was but a portrait of his spiritual discomfort. True knowledge of God always leads to repentance. This in turn leads to cleansing and forgiveness. The holiness of God that first hurts, then heals. Finally, cleansing leads to commissioning. Mercy leads to ministry. Having seen God, what else is there to say but: “Here I am [Lord]. Send me” (Isa. 6:8).

So, how will you respond to the Lord Jesus Christ? Isaiah saw his glory, and as a result felt the crushing weight of his sin, experienced the burning fire of forgiveness and cleansing, and undertook the mission God had given him. How will you react? What do you say to what you have seen in Scripture concerning Jesus?