

## **Awe & Fear = Holiness – a church purpose.**

I Peter 1:13-16; Isaiah 6:1-13

Growing up as a missionary child, it should be no surprise that I learned that good works are important to please a holy God. And all those do not's. Then later in university, I noticed people who tried to be Christians, generally had fewer self inflicted problems in life. In Brasil when we were at a missionary retreat, we listened to R. C. Sproul explain the book of Ephesians. One of the themes was holiness.

It felt strange but special and precious in a seminary small group, when someone shared a very deep personal profound story or insight. The professor would say, "We just walked on holy ground." A few years later I discovered the books of Jerry Bridges and it happened his first one was titled, "The Pursuit of Holiness." And recently hearing Jon Baptiste and Steven Coubert talk about racism & tie John Lewis & an incident in his life of being asked for forgiveness and him extending it, and it being tied to holiness, caused me to perk up and pay attention – again.

So holiness has been on my mind off and on over my life time. This should be natural as a follower of Jesus since the old concept of the imitation of Christ and WWJD, what would Jesus do?, are important as the remedy for sin, ethics, Christian theology, and fundamental for following Jesus. But do we give enough attention to holiness as a purpose for church?

How many of you remember the worship song, Majesty? This great Jack Hayford song goes: Majesty, worship his majesty. Unto Jesus be all glory, power and praise. Majesty, kingdom authority flow from his throne, Unto his own his anthem raise. So exalt lift up on high the name of Jesus. Magnify, come glorify.... Majesty, Worship His majesty, Jesus, who died, now glorified, King of all kings.

It was a really popular great worship song for many years. But I don't hear it much today. I liked that we stood up to sing it. I remember

being shocked, appalled and upset when the Gaither Homecoming group didn't stand up when they sang it. Sacrilege!

Just like when we sing the Hallelujah Chorus. We stand as a mark of respect, honor, adoration and worship. The act of standing is vertical worship directed at God, instead of horizontal worship. But lately I've been in places when people grudgingly & slowly stand for the Hallelujah Chorus, instead of anticipating & get ready to stand & participate in worship. I love those services where a major reason people attend is to eagerly join the impromptu choir to sing the Hallelujah Chorus. You can sense and see the anticipation and excitement. Plus it's great to feel the joy when we stand to sing 606.

But there are people who argue that the church has lost its sense of what it is to stand before a holy God. Drew Dyck wrote: "We evangelicals love talking about God's love. In church services we worship with songs dripping with lyrics that border on romantic. The sermon will gush with assurances of God's affection. Such affirmations are good. We need reminders of God's love – but rarely do we speak of God's majesty, or glory, let alone whisper a word about his wrath. It seems we have a one-sided view of God. Jesus is treated as a special friend or buddy. God is the big guy upstairs. Do we come across as too causal and familiar about God? And any talk of divine holiness often is dismissed as legalistic or judgmental or uptight.

Kevin DeYoung says: "There's no shortage of effort or energy as we go about our tasks - until it comes to holiness. It seems believers do not take seriously enough the Bible's call to personal holiness. We are too at peace with world-ness in our homes, too at ease with sin in our lives, & too content with spiritual immaturity in our churches. The pursuit of holiness does not occupy the place in our hearts that it should."

And I would add, when we take a serious look around the world, including in the church, it seems not a lot of people take God's holiness seriously. So holiness – fear and awe, should

be an intentional purpose of why we exist as followers of Jesus and as congregations. Of all the things about God that are hard for us to focus on perhaps the most difficult is the Almighty's holiness. Holiness is one of those uncomfortable attributes because it reminds us how much unlike God we are. The definition of holiness is: God's intrinsic and transcendent purity, the standard of righteousness to which the whole universe will be conformed. God does not conform to any standard created by others. The Almighty Creator is the standard. There-fore the creation must conform to God's standard.

I think Holiness is a word that can make us feel uneasy when we take it seriously. It seems lofty, threatening, alien. We instinctively sense that God's holiness has dangerous overtones. His purity calls our sinful attachments into question. The Almighty's perfection demands we give all our sins up in order to enjoy the greatest of all goods - belonging to a God of infinite love and power. To come casually with our hearts grasping tightly to the sins we cherish, or to come lightly as though they are no big deal, might be like throwing ourselves onto a roaring fire with the expectation we will not perish. How can we sinful and broken human beings hope to be in the presence of a holy God and survive the experience?

Even though I wince when I hear too much of behave rightly, and live right just to get to heaven; I agree with the focus. But on the other hand, if we drop our Creator's commands we are in big trouble. Are we afraid of words like effort, diligence and obedience? How much do we downplay verses that call us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12); or command us to cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit (2 Cor. 7:1); or warn against even a hint of immorality among the saints (Eph. 5:3); or downplay working for God's justice?

I'm happy there are Christians who are really excited about justice, peace, evangelism and serving in their communities. Others are

passionate about precise theology. And when we are asked to describe God, we list things like, merciful, gracious, kind, but what about glory, holiness, terrifying, awe and fear? Where are the Christians known for their zeal for purity, perfection, and holiness? Where is the passion for honoring Christ with Christlike obedience? We need more followers of Jesus who say and live with the Apostle Paul, "Look carefully then how you walk." How we live. (Eph. 5:15)

When God shows up in Scripture, people cower and tremble. Go mute. The ones who manage speech fall into despair. Fainters abound. Take the prophet Daniel. He could stare down lions, but when the heavens opened, he swooned. Ezekiel, too, was overwhelmed by his vision of God. After witnessing Yahweh's throne chariot lift into the air with the sound of a jet engine, he fell face-first to the ground. When Solomon dedicated the temple, the glory of the Lord was so overpowering, "the priests could not perform their service" (1 Kings 8:11).

New Testament characters didn't fare better. John's revelations left him lying on the ground "as though dead" (Rev. 1:17). Even bold Saul collapsed before the blazing brilliance of the resurrected Christ when confronted. And Jesus' death and resurrection came with: The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, exposing the Holy of Holies. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs. We don't see that every day! God was making an important point.

Holiness is more than just right living. The concept of holiness is difficult to explain. At least I find a lack of words to describe its full dimensions. Or even stories. So let's start with some scripture to recognize its importance.

I Peter 1:15-16 instructs us, "But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: '**Be holy**, because I am holy.'"

What does this mean in practical terms? We could say, it means, be fearful and full of awe.

Hebrews 12:14 commands us, “**Make every effort to live in peace with everyone** & to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. That’s quite a threat – be holy to see the Lord.

Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:48, “**Be perfect**, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

So being **holy, living in peace with everyone, perfect and pure** tie together. I Corinthians 7:1 demands, “**let us purify ourselves** from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.” It means we would take being pure seriously. We do this not just to get to heaven, and not just out of reverence for God, but what else?

Plus the Bible offers up a number of strange, scary awe filled stories that go with holiness. One of them is the story of Moses and the burning bush. God said to Moses, Exodus 3:5-6, “Do not come any closer, Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” Then he said, “I am the God of your father, of Abraham, of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

A few years later, when Moses delivered the Ten Commandments, he had to wear a veil because his face was radiant and the Israelites were afraid to look at him or go near him. Exodus 34:29-35.

Then at the beginning of the church, we have a very scary event, where the message is clear: “You haven’t just lied to people, you have lied to God.” That’s the story of Ananias and Sapphira. (Acts 5:1-11) This is a mirror of an OT story of robbery – as Israel was becoming the people of God as they entered the promised land. Achan violated the covenant by stealing, sinning. (Joshua 7) Timely warning!

Holiness is not mentioned, but the implication in both stories, at the beginning of the nation of

Israel and later the church, is: a Holy God can’t stand deception, uncleanness, sin, among his people. These were and are holy warnings that should scare us as well as create awe in us.

And you could pick out other holiness linked stories like when Uzzah, (2 Sam 6:1-10) to be helpful, reached out to keep the ark of the covenant from tipping over. But God struck him dead. He was not supposed to touch the ark, a holy symbol for Israel. Unfair, Strange.

And with Jesus, John, Peter and James we have the event of the Transfiguration, of Jesus. What a strange event. But the three disciples saw the glory of God. (Matthew 17:1-8)

Holiness is the centerpiece of God’s attributes. Of all the things God is, at the center of His being is His holiness. Our Creator’s holiness unlocks the door to understanding and making sense out of everything else about Him. This attribute infiltrates all the other attributes. His love is holy love. His all-knowing is holy all-knowing. His all-presence is holy all-presence. Everything about The Almighty is infiltrated by this defining attribute of God called holiness. Therefore, if we want to know God we must understand the idea of God’s holiness.

Many Bibles title our Isaiah passage, "Isaiah's Commission." But this title, that is not in the original text, is a classic example of burying the lead. These verses do record Isaiah's prophetic calling, but we see one of the most harrowing images of God in all of literature. There are several things that happen in Isaiah’s vision.

**The first thing we notice is God’s Greatness and Glory.** Isaiah saw Yahweh on the throne in the temple. He saw and heard seraphim crying out: “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.” The name, *seraphim*, literally means "fiery, burning ones." The sound of their voices shook the doorposts and the temple was filled with smoke. Now if that doesn’t fill you with fear and awe, I don’t know what will. Notice even

the seraphim who were glorifying God, had to cover their faces from the direct gaze of God.

And notice, God is referred to as holy three times. The Hebrew language possesses an unusual way of expressing its comparatives and superlatives. Comparatives are repeated twice. Superlatives are repeated three times. Only on a handful of occasions does the Bible repeat or elevate something in the third or superlative degree. It does so about the holiness of God both here and again in Revelations 4:8: Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God Almighty, who was, who is, and who is to come. This is making the point that Yahweh has no equal. There is a profound difference between us and Yahweh. We make a mistake when we imagine God's goodness is simply higher than that of the best human. God is in a class all of His own.

Another thing to pay attention to in this event is the word **holy includes an ethical element**. We see **God's goodness and humanity's unworthiness**. I think it's safe to imagine that the body of Isaiah was shaking. He was fearful and probably awed, because of being in God's presence. He was confronted with the reality of God's purity, perfectness, and greatness. Plus he was instantly and profoundly aware of his own sinfulness and the sinfulness of the society in which he lived. This is so real that he cries out, "Woe to me!" "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

Please note – Isaiah immediately goes to – unclean lips. Not unclean heart, or thoughts, or actions, or something else unclean. But lips – voice, speaking. I'll let you draw your own conclusions about this.

And notice, Isaiah's response is not what we would have expected. He didn't say something like, "Cooooo!" or "Wow!" Isaiah though is not impressed or wowed. He is "undone." He is immediately aware that he is outside of God's glory, as are the people of Israel. When seen next to the purity of God's

holiness, the impurity of human sin is overwhelmingly evident. The prophet realizes with sickening force that his character is not in keeping with God any more that the people's character is. The reason he is undone and outside of the meaning of life is because he was unclean.

Anytime someone gets a glimpse of the Almighty God they are terrified (Lk. 1:12; 2:9; Acts 5:19). Why? Because in Exodus 33:20, God said, "no one may see me and live" (Jn. 1:18). God is so good that He will destroy anything sinful or unholy. When the unholy confronts the holy we become very conscious of our own sinfulness. When seen next to the purity of God's holiness, the impurity of human sin is overwhelmingly evident. It is like we live our lives with most of our lights off so that we are able to hide most of our wickedness in the dark. But when we come into the presence of God, all the hidden is exposed.

This is why I think we need to focus on the holiness of God more. We need to stop comparing ourselves to others and instead compare ourselves to a holy God.

There is a story of King Frederick II, an eighteenth-century king in Prussia, what is today Germany. He was visiting a prison in Berlin when the inmates crowded around him to proclaim their innocence. All except one man. He sat quietly in the corner, head bowed.

"Frederick walked over to him and said, 'What are you here for?' "Armed robbery, your majesty,' the man replied.

'Are you guilty?' the king asked.

'Yes, sir. I deserve this punishment.'

"The king turned to the guard and ordered, 'Set this guilty man free. I don't want him corrupting all these other innocent people.'"

This is why I believe that a person who has no sense of their own sinfulness has really never

had a true sense of the nature of God. The person who believes that they did the right things to get saved has no awareness of how deeply stained they really are. We must be undone before we can be remade. We must be undone before we can be remade. The Holy Spirit has to awaken us to our sinfulness before we can be summoned to the grace of the Holy Almighty Creator God.

Then the hot coal on Isaiah's lips cauterizes his sin. His guilt is taken away & his sin atoned for.

Drew Dyck says, Isaiah had a threefold vision. It was a vision of deity - he saw the Lord. It was a vision of depravity - he saw himself and the people around him. It was a vision of duty - he saw a lost world and responded to God seeking someone to send. I think if holiness became a stronger purpose of the church, we would have more fear and awe of our holy God. And, more courage to let the Almighty Creator Holy God use our lips like Isaiah did.

A story of holiness!

Stephen Colbert  
A Crowd Surfing American Hero:  
Remembering Congressman John Lewis

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a89\\_7o5gH4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a89_7o5gH4)

Barbershop Stories with Jon Batiste and  
Congressman John Lewis

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCHBi030TMM&t=154s>