

## “The Holiness of God”

(reading version)

Luke 8:26-37

Dr. Jerry Nelson

If God the Son, Jesus, started coming to my church or your church I'm afraid it wouldn't be long before we'd ask him to leave. If Jesus came and spent time in our high schools, very soon students would want him to leave. If he started working where you work it wouldn't be long before both the employer and the employees would want to get rid of him. And I believe that if Jesus didn't change his methods and his message, we'd do the same thing to him they did 2000 years ago, we'd finally kill him. And I believe men and women would kill him today for the same reason they killed him then – because he is holy!

Holiness disturbs us. It disqualifies us and it threatens us! When God lived on earth, his presence eventually provoked one of two responses: humility or hostility. Indifference was not an option because God's presence didn't offer that option. The same is true today. You can't truly mean you believe in the God of the Bible and live indifferently toward him.

I have today taken on the task describing the indescribable, of expressing the inexpressible – the holiness of God. In the book of Job, Zophar asked:

*“Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than the heavens – what can you do? They are deeper than the depths of the grave – what can you know? Their measure is longer than the earth and wider than the sea.” (Job 11:7-9)*

I'm certain it would be easier to describe a sunset to a sightless man than to describe the holiness of God. It is hard to describe a sunset to a blind man because we have no common ground from which to start. How do we describe reds or visual contrasts? So it is in describing the holy – we are talking about an attribute of God that is so different from anything we experience that we have no common ground – almost no common language for comparison.

I want to give you two words, however, on which to hang our thoughts for today, as we look at how people experience the holiness of God: **transcendence and purity**. First, the word transcendence; it means to “climb across”. It has to do with exceeding usual limits. To transcend is to rise above the limits of knowledge or experience. When we speak of the holiness of God as his transcendence then we are talking about how He is so far above us, so beyond us, so different from us, as to be foreign to us. Look with me at Luke 8 and see how people experienced that when God was here in the person of God the Son, Jesus. Luke 8:26-35:

*They sailed to the region of the Gerasenes, which is across the lake from Galilee. <sup>27</sup> When Jesus stepped ashore, he was met by a demon-possessed man from the town. For a long time this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but had lived in the tombs. <sup>28</sup> When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell at his feet, shouting at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don't torture me!" <sup>29</sup> For Jesus had commanded the evil spirit to come out of the man. Many times it had seized him, and though he was chained hand and foot and kept under guard, he had broken his chains and had been driven by the demon into solitary places. <sup>30</sup> Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" "Legion," he replied, because many demons had gone into him. <sup>31</sup> And they begged him repeatedly not to order them to go into the Abyss. <sup>32</sup> A large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside. The demons begged Jesus to let them go into them, and he gave them permission. <sup>33</sup> When the demons came out of the man, they went into the pigs, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. <sup>34</sup> When those tending the pigs saw what had happened, they ran off and reported this in the town and countryside,*

What is most interesting to me is how the people responded to Jesus at that point in time.

*8:35 “and the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting at Jesus' feet, dressed and in his right mind; and **they were afraid**.*

And in their fear what did they ask Jesus to do?

*8:36-37 Those who had seen it told the people how the demon-possessed man had been cured. <sup>37</sup> Then all the people of the region of the Gerasenes **asked Jesus to leave them**, because they were overcome with fear.*

Why were they so afraid? They experienced the presence of holiness! This was a person and a power beyond their ability to comprehend. Here was a man who was so different, so other, that their natural response was fear!

About 60 years ago Orson Wells broadcast the radio program called the “War of the Worlds.” Probably you have seen the motion picture remake. “War of the Worlds” was a fictional account of an invasion of New Jersey by Martians. So realistic was the broadcast, so convincing were Well’s words that listeners thought it was for real. How did they respond? FEAR! One man took up a gun to go kill the Martians. Martians were so totally foreign in the minds of people that they were immediately perceived as a threat.

To the Gerasenes of the Galilee, Jesus was so completely different, so uniquely other, so outside their experience, so transcendent, that he didn’t fit any category they could imagine. They were in the presence of the holy. When Jesus calmed the storm one day on Galilee he created that same fear in his disciples, a fear that was greater than their fear of death from the storm. They asked, “Who is this?” or “What kind of man is this?” They could find no category for Jesus. He merely spoke, he didn’t pray, he didn’t plead with the Father, he spoke and the winds obeyed. The disciples had met good men and bad men, smart men and ignorant ones. They had met men who acted in unusual ways and were called holy men but they were still like the disciples, merely men. But this man, how do you classify him? Only one word captures it – “holy!” It means unique, truly one of a kind, other, outside of our experience or comprehension, holy. (R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, chapters 3 and 4)

Rudolf Otto, a theologian of a previous generation, coined the phrase, “mysterium tremendum” – the awesome mystery. He said there is a vague, incomprehensible, something in the universe, surrounding the universe, and experienced in the heart of every person. There is a sense that there is something uncreated – a presence that is outside

our experience. In all of human nature there is this instinct that there is something besides us. To the animist, the Moslem, even to the non-religious religions, that “mystery” drives their religions.

According to the Apostle Paul in Romans 1, all people have that instinctual knowledge of the existence of God – “his eternal power and divine nature” the awesome mystery but instead of bowing in humility, they create false religions or no religion and they refuse to acknowledge him, and exchanging the truth for a lie, they create their own god – one they can manage.

Many years ago A. W. Pink wrote:

*“Men imagine that the Most High is moved by sentiment, rather than actuated by principle. They suppose that his (sovereignty) is such an idle fiction that Satan is thwarting his designs on every side. They think that if he has formed any plan or purpose at all, then it must be like theirs, constantly subject to change. They openly declare that whatever power he possesses must be restricted, lest he invade the citadel of man’s free will and reduce him to a machine. They lower the all-efficacious atonement, which has actually redeemed everyone for whom it was made, to a mere remedy which sin-sick souls may use if they feel disposed to; and they (reduce) the invincible work of the Holy Spirit to an offer of the gospel which sinners may accept or reject as they please.” “The God of this...century no more resembles the supreme Sovereign of Holy (Scripture) than does the dim flickering of a candle (reflect) the glory of the midday sun.” “A God whose **will** is resisted, whose **plans** are frustrated, whose **purpose** is checkmated, possesses no title to Deity, and so far from being a fit object of worship, merits naught but contempt.” (A.W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, 28-29)*

So which is it; Is he the cosmic Casper Milquetoast we have made him into or is he holy? In spite of how we too often conceive him or don’t even think about him, God is holy!! Did the Garasenes believe in a god? I suppose they did – at least they believed in their concept of God. Their god was worshipped in a certain way and apparently left them alone to pursue life as they saw fit. Like most people, they believed in a god but their god was for religious purposes not real life.

In the real world the laws of nature ruled. Then imagine seeing all your assumptions about those laws violated. They saw a man instantly, dramatically and impossibly healed. Not a long slow recovery, not a temporary remission, but a miracle. Imagine the disciples also seeing:

- gravity suspended when a 160 pound man walked on water,
- optic nerves restored with muddy spit,
- wine instantly made from water without grapes or process,
- a three-day-dead body (Lazarus) brought to life.

How were they to interpret those experiences?

Does God really matter here and now or is he simply a religious idea maybe useful for another time like “someday” or “when I die?” Is there a kind of nonessential religious world and then the real world? Or is there an alive, thinking, acting God who actually exists out there and is actually here, now? C.S. Lewis wrote,

*“An impersonal God – well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap, best of all. But (a real) God, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at infinite speed...that is quite another matter. There comes a moment when children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: ‘was that a real footstep in the hall?’ There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found him? We never meant for it to come to that. Worse yet, supposing he found us?”* (C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*, 98)

So when the Garasenes met God – the holy one – they were terrified. They were afraid because here was an awesome mystery, someone who was so different he didn’t fit their categories. But more than that, they wanted him to go away because when they stood in the presence of this holy God he **disqualified the way they lived their lives**. Many people live their lives as if there is only one reality and it is the one we can see, and that we are in charge and must manage and “milk” this life for all we can get while we are alive. But Jesus’ holiness, his presence and actions, shouts that something else is going on beyond what we can see - another reality with someone else in charge. To the Garasenes, this Jesus presented a different way of understanding and living life. But they liked the “god” and the

life they had. The same is true today. The god many people know today is a mild mannered Clark-Kent-type who changes into superman to help us out when we need it but otherwise stays out of the way. We like the god who is somewhere out there, who might intervene if we get in real trouble and who will rescue us when we die, but we don't want a truly Holy God who interferes with our lives.

Do you believe in God? What kind of God do you believe in? The God of the Bible, the God of reality, is HOLY.

- He, and no other, is the great "I am."
- He is the uncreated creator, the uncaused cause.
- He gives definition to eternal, infinite, omnipotent.
- He is before all things and in him all things hold together.

God is the only being to which the word "is" eternally applies. But if such a God exists, who is being, who is person, if every detail of life is continually and sovereignly influenced by that God, and if we are being held accountable by that God for our every thought, word and action, then he matters and he matters now!

So again I ask do you believe in God and what kind of God do you believe in? One man wrote:

*"We are told repeatedly that the vast majority of people believe in God. But human beings, particularly modern ones, are reluctant to surrender their concept of an abstract, impersonal deity. Their "god" is very comfortable; it does nothing and demands nothing. Like a bottle of aspirin sitting in a medicine cabinet, it can be taken out, dusted off and used at our convenience to assuage our cosmic aches and pains. Such a god will not pursue you, he will not interfere in your private affairs. There is no danger that the earth will quake, lightning will flash and the mountains will melt like wax at its approach. There is no question of owing it our absolute allegiance or of standing open before it to give account of ourselves."* (Thomas

*Trevethen, The Beauty of God's Holiness, 28-29)*

But if he is the God the Bible says he is, how can we live a minute without paying attention to him? I have sometimes prayed, "Lord, give me a powerful sense of your presence. Help me to know your holiness, to be aware of your otherness, your transcendent deity. But

even as I pray that, I am keenly aware that I am not certain if I truly want that. To see him in his holiness would demand a change in my life, my priorities, my use of time, and even my attitudes. Exodus 15:11 “Who among the gods is like you O Lord? Who is like you in holiness, awesome glory, working wonders? If the God of the Bible is THE transcendent God then he has a claim on our lives that will not allow us to go on in life as usual. Is it any wonder the Garasenes wanted him out of the way? Is it any wonder people are hostile to him today? He disqualifies our assumptions. He disturbs our lives. His very presence calls us to change.

It is told that when Leonardo de Vinci was about to depict the face of Jesus in his painting of “The Last Supper” he prepared himself with prayer and meditation. Still, however, when he raised his brush to give visual expression to that sacred person, his hand trembled. Today we are in the presence of that same holy God. And it calls us to humility and obedience.

Someone asked the English essayist Charles Lamb what it would be like to suddenly see people from history alive again with them. Someone asked “What if Christ entered this room?” Lamb’s countenance changed and as was his manner when he was deeply moved, he stuttered, “If Shakespeare entered we would all rise; but if Jesus appeared, we must kneel.”

That raises **the second characteristic** of God’s holiness as seen in Jesus. I have spoken thus far of his transcendence. I turn now to **his purity**. There is a moral excellence about Jesus that doesn’t allow most people to be critical of Jesus even if they are critical of Christianity. Isn’t that interesting to you? Even the most severe critics of Christianity are complimentary of Jesus. His purity, his moral excellence is the source of that uncommon respect.

Sin is universal. It is a deep dark mystery of human existence, the stumbling block to reason, the problem of problems, and the source of all misery. And many people are willing to admit their defects, their folly and foibles – at least admit them in some general way. But in Jesus we have the one solitary and absolute exception to the universal nature of sin. Jesus never sinned.

Too often when we think of holiness, we think of dull, lifeless inactivity. We think that to be holy a person must withdraw from life. In the very enjoyable story, "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever", the little girl who played Mary, we are told, was supposed to look pure, put Vaseline on her eyelids and stand perfectly still looking absolutely serene – as if from another world. That's our concept of holiness – withdrawn from reality. But Jesus was immersed in the affairs of life. He was not inactive like some monk in seclusion. He worked with masses of people. He went from before sunrise to late in the day, hiking, preaching, healing, counseling, and defending. He spent hours with the slow to learn disciples. He was ridiculed and defamed. He was abandoned by those into whom he had poured his life. He was physically and emotionally drained again and again. But he never spoke a word that had to be modified or retracted. No half-truths, exaggerations or misstatements were ever uttered. He never regretted a single thought. He never had to apologize for a single word or action. He never shed a tear of repentance. Never had to confess a sin or ask forgiveness. In fact he invited his enemies to find one thing of which they could accurately accuse him. He never retaliated in word or thought - even when ruthlessly attacked and scandalously slandered. Here was a man who felt, thought, acted, spoke, suffered, and died surrounded by sinners BUT was never contaminated by sin. His disciples, those who knew him best, never charged him with any sin. They found NO inconsistency between what he said and what he did.

Preaching great morality and practicing great morality are two very different things. Moses, the great law-giver was saturated with guilt. David, who sang the noblest songs of holiness, was himself among the greatest of sinners. But Jesus did what he taught. Whether he was with family, the sick, his adversaries, his disciples, the rich or the poor, he was always the same. What he was at 12 in the temple, he was at 33 on the cross. When he came to the end of his life on this earth, he prayed, "Father, I have accomplished your will perfectly." Was that obnoxious pride or arrogant hypocrisy? No! The facts substantiated the claim. In him was no sin. If there is one attribute of God that encompasses all the others it is this attribute of holiness.

The Puritan preacher Charnock wrote that without holiness (purity)

“(God’s) patience would (simply) be an indulgence of sin, his mercy (merely) a fondness, his wrath (an irrational) madness, his power a (capricious) tyranny, his wisdom an unworthy subtlety.” <sup>114</sup> The Existence and Attributes of God vol 2

Negatively, holiness is unpolluted freedom from all evil.  
Positively, it is the integrity of the Divine nature - perfect conformity of every thought, emotion and action.

No contradiction.

He loves perfectly.

He wills perfectly.

He acts perfectly.

His grace, mercy, righteousness, and justice are perfect.

He is perfection! He is the beauty of holiness!

He would cease to be God if he were not perfection in every way.

Included with that is the fact that he perfectly abhors sin! Habakkuk 1:13 “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.” It is not that he chooses to hate sin, he cannot **not** hate it because it is the antithesis of his very nature. <sup>ibid. 114ff</sup> It is this purity, which makes him to us **most attractive** and most fearsome.

I earlier said that if God came to this earth again, the way he came last time, we would again kill him. Why, because his perfection, his purity, stands in such sharp contrast to our sinfulness that we can’t stand it. Nobody likes a “pious Patty,” a “do-goody-two-shoes,” or a “holier than thou.” When somebody by their life or by their words points out that our actions are wrong, we resent it. BUT with God there is no hypocrisy in his purity.

Many of you know the story of Peter and the other disciples of Jesus fishing all night and catching nothing. In the morning Jesus asked permission to board their boat and then he suggested they fish off the other side of the boat. To their amazement they caught so many fish they could hardly haul them in. In that moment, Peter got a flash of insight that he had never had before. For some reason this incident triggered in him a new awareness of true holiness. Standing in Jesus presence in that smelly fishing boat, Peter instantly felt self-conscious, embarrassed, conspicuous, and ashamed. Standing in the presence of the Holy, Peter saw himself as he had never seen

himself before. It was like the brightest light of Purity all of the sudden illuminated him – and every sinful thought, every wicked action, every imperfection was exposed. Peter was being seen for who he really was. And his response confirms it: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.”

I once received a letter that was, to me, very sad. In the letter the woman told of her fear of standing before Jesus with all of the sin of her life. If she could convince herself that her conduct was okay, she would be fine – but she knew Jesus – and his purity was a constant indictment. Like Peter, there was a part of her that wished Jesus would go away because the awareness of her sin was a pain too great to bear. I’m so glad the Lord didn’t do what Peter asked. I’m so glad the Lord doesn’t just go away. Instead the Lord said something quite unexpected. He said, Peter, don’t be afraid. One difference between Peter and the Garasenes who also asked Jesus to leave was that Peter admitted his sin. With Peter’s confession came forgiveness. I am so grateful that as one sinner writing to another I could respond to the woman who wrote to me, and I could say for Jesus: “Don’t be afraid.” “Though your sins are red like crimson, they shall be (white) as wool.” Though your sins are real and heinous before a holy God, they can be forgiven through the God who died for those sins. As you come to him confessing your sin and your need for his forgiveness and grace and trusting him to forgive– he will not leave – he will forgive. Jesus’ purity makes us keenly aware of our own impurity. **But Jesus purity is what also makes it possible for us to be forgiven.**

Theologian David Wells wrote,

*“The loss of the traditional (understanding) of God as holy is now manifested everywhere in the evangelical world...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. Divorced from the holiness of God, our gospel becomes indistinguishable from any of a host of alternative self-help doctrines. Divorced from the holiness of God, our public morality is reduced to little more than an accumulation of trade-*

*offs between competing private interests. Divorced from the holiness of God, our worship becomes mere entertainment. The holiness of God is the very cornerstone of Christian faith, for it is the foundation of reality. Sin is defiance of God's holiness, the Cross is the outworking and victory of God's holiness, and faith is the recognition of God's holiness. Knowing that God is holy is therefore the key to knowing life as it truly is, knowing Christ as he truly is, knowing why he came, and knowing how life will end. (David Wells, No Place for Truth)*

Purity and transcendence describe the holiness of God. How do you respond to such a holy God? Will you kneel in confession and adoration?