

The Holiness of Jesus
12/13/98

Today I'm calling you to a greater reality than the one you live with every other day.

We live from day to day as if we exist in a closed system.

It's like a computer – “garbage in, garbage out” or “WYSIWYG,” “what you see is what you get.”

We rightly assume that life is controlled by natural laws but we incorrectly assume they are controlled ONLY by natural laws.

How does God fit into life?

Do you believe in God?

What kind of God do you believe in?

You say you are not pantheist (believing that God is the sum of all that is) nor polytheist (believing in many gods) but that you are a monotheist (believing in one God.)

Okay, so you are a monotheist but you haven't told me much about your God. God is not simply a number, even the number one.

Monotheism is about the nature of God – 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 essence to which the word “is” eternally applies.

He was and is and shall be.

Imagine seeing all your assumptions about natural law violated.

Gravity suspended when a 160 pound man walked on water, bread and fish created out of nothing, optic nerves restored with muddy spit, wine instantly made from water without grapes or process, a three-day-dead body (Lazarus) brought to life,

What do you do with that information?

Do you compartmentalize it, tucking it into a file marked “religious but irrelevant?”

Is there a God who is actually there?

Does he make a difference or is he part of a different realm, the spiritual realm, for another time like “someday” or “when I die?”

Is there a church-religious-spiritual world and then the real world?

But if we are created by a God who exists, who is a being, who is person, if we are continually and sovereignly influenced by that God in every detail of life, and if we are being held accountable by that God for our every thought, word and action, he matters!

So again I ask do you believe in God and what kind of God do you believe in?

If he is merely the God many have made him out to be or like the gods of many religions than he is probably quite manageable. But if he is the God the Bible says he is, how can we live a minute without paying attention to him?

Many of us have simply made God a super-sized us. He's smarter, stronger, more enduring, etc. But that doesn't begin to describe God. When the Bible says that God is holy it means he is other. We are one thing; he is the other. The truth is that God defies full explanation because we have no categories or experience by which to describe him fully. He's in a league of his own, a league of one. Nearly 100 years ago German scholar, Rudolf Otto, described it "awful mystery" By awful he didn't mean bad but full of awe – beyond understanding. How do you describe color to a man who has never had sight or how do you describe the voice of Pavarotti to a woman who has never heard sounds.

This awful mystery provokes fear. Is it the fear of the unknown? Is it also then the fear of our own limitations and thus vulnerability?

R.C. Sproul reminds us that when Jesus calmed the storm one day on Galilee he created a fear in his disciples 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 Romans, Jews, Greeks, and Barbarians.

They 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!”

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)

How then can we know God?

I will deal with that next week. (God has revealed himself in his Word) See Reardon’s “Monotheism” article in Touchstone – God makes himself known or we wouldn’t have known him.

A kingdom is not first of all a place but a reign.

A kingdom is the sphere in which a government or governor reigns.

The Bible speaks of the kingdom or kingdoms of this world in contrast to the kingdom of God.

In the former, people reign supreme or at least think they do.

In the latter God reigns.

Pastor and author Eugene Peterson reminds us of two realities, two worlds, two kingdoms, the seen and the unseen.

There is the world of the here and now, of us doing our self-centered thing, of us attempting to make life work to our advantage as best we can.

We know this world is broken. Even if everything went right we know it ends in death. But it does always go right and in fact for millions it goes far more wrong than right and still ends in death.

But the Bible says that there is another Kingdom that has been born. It is not a dream or false hope, it is in fact a kingdom more real and more lasting than the world and time that we live in now that we think is so enduring.

That Kingdom was initiated by Jesus when he came the first time and it is growing and will culminate in full flower when Jesus comes again. (Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, 34)

Jesus made it clear that there are people who are part of that kingdom as evidenced by their receiving and following him and there

are people who are not part of that kingdom as evidenced by their not receiving and following him.

“God’s mercy, patience and love must be fully preached in the church. But they are not credible unless they are presented in tension with God’s infinite power, complete and sovereign control of the universe, holiness, and righteousness. And where God’s righteousness is clearly presented, compassionate warnings of his holy anger against sin must be given, and warnings also of the certainty of divine judgment in endless alienation from God which will be unimaginably worse than the literal descriptions of hell. It is no wonder that the world and the church are not awakened when our leadership is either singing a lullaby concerning these matters or presenting them in a caricature which is so grotesque that it is unbelievable.” (Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal*, 84-85)

The holiness of God ought to at first frighten us and then when saved by his grace it comforts us.
His otherness in purity and power frighten until we also know is mercy and grace.

God is THE point of reference for all else.

For centuries and even today, much of humanity conceives of “God” by what can be seen and experienced.
For the ancients and even Hinduism today, “God” became all they couldn’t explain or control.
And so “God” was the force within nature’s capricious ways.

The “gods” then were seen in conflict with each other.
 And religion became humanity’s way of attempting to manage the gods – appeasing or otherwise influencing – in order to predict and control outcomes.

For them “God” was actually in (part of) the seen world. He was not elsewhere but here. He was not above the natural world but he was the natural world.

Judaism/Christianity conceives of God as “high and lifted up.”
 He is in a class by himself – not simply part of what is.
 God is above and outside the natural world and history.
 God as the maker of all that is, is not subject to others or other things – he controls it.
 God is unchangeable thus constant and to be trusted.
 Hebrew has no word for “goddess” which is remarkable in light of all the other cultures of the world.

“We are told repeatedly that the vast majority of people believe in God. But human beings, particularly modern ones, are reluctant to surrender the 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, 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)

Everybody likes a safe, nonjudgmental god.
 But if you mention a God who is actually there, one who has set purposes and acts accordingly, you will incur the pity if not the hostility of those around you.

“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 God himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband – 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)

Is the God of the Bible an embarrassment to us?

Did he actually walk on water, change water into wine, give sight instantly to a blind man, raise Lazarus from the dead, and rise again from the dead himself?

Infinite – not finite, not limited.

God's immutability or changelessness is not to picture a statue. It is to understand him as wholly consistent with his character. He will not be a different person under different circumstances. He is entirely faithful.

If Jesus came today as he came before, as a baby in a manger, I'm nearly convinced we'd kill him again.

If he came and spent time in our high schools – high-schoolers would try to get rid of him.

If he came to our places of work and spent days visiting with the employees, they would eventually seek to kill him.

Even if he came to our church and spent weeks with us – I'm afraid that apart from a change of heart and mind many of us would want him to leave.

And I believe men and women would kill him today for the same reason they killed him then – he is holy!

Holiness disturbs us.

It threatens and disqualifies us.

When Jesus was here before, his presence eventually provoked one of two responses: humility or hostility.

Indifference was not an option because Jesus' presence didn't offer that option.

Likewise, today, when people truly see Jesus for who he is, and don't just have a caricature of him – an erroneous conception of who he is – they respond in humility or hostility.

I have today taken on the task of once again describing the indescribable, the ineffable, the inexpressible – the holiness of Jesus.

I'm certain it would be easier to describe a sunset to a sightless man than to describe the holiness of Jesus.

Why is it so hard to describe a sunset to a blind man?

Because you have no common ground from which to start.

How do you describe reds or visual contrasts?

So it is in describing holiness – we are talking about an attribute of Jesus that is so different from anything we experience that we have no common ground – almost no common language for comparison.

The holiness of Jesus is something we are able to experience far more readily than define.

But I want to give you two words on which to hang our thoughts for today, as we look at how people experience the holiness of Jesus:

transcendence and purity.

In describing holiness then I would speak of his pure transcendence and his transcendent purity.

I will hopefully make better sense of that as we proceed.

The word transcendence means to “climb across”.

It has to do with exceeding usual limits.

To transcend it to rise above the limit of knowledge or experience.

When we speak of the holiness of Jesus as his transcendence then we are talking about how He is so far above us, to beyond us, so different from us, as to be foreign to us.

Look with me at Luke 8 and see how people experienced it when Jesus was here.

READ Luke 8:26-35

What is most interesting to me is how the people responded to Jesus at that point in time. READ 8:35

And in their fear what did they ask Jesus to do? READ 8:36-37

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" - it was a fictional account of an invasion of New Jersey by Martians.

So realistic was the broadcast, so convincing were Well's words that people 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 perceived as an immediate threat.

To the Garasenes of the Galilee, Jesus was so completely different, so uniquely other, so transcendent, that he didn't fit any category they could imagine.

They were in the presence of the holy.

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 – the awesome mystery BUT instead of bowing in humility they refuse to acknowledge him, and exchanging the truth for a lie, they create their own god – one they can manage.

Did the Garasenes believe in 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.

They created their God in their own image to assist them in fulfilling their goals.

Actually their god, like most people’s gods was just a larger than life human being.

He was like them, just bigger, wise, and stronger than them.

But when they met Jesus – the holy one – they were terrified.

They were afraid because here was an awesome mystery, one who was unique, wholly other, who didn’t fit their categories.

They stood in the presence of this holy transcendent God and his presence disqualified their god and disqualified their puny beliefs and disqualified the way they lived their lives.

That’s why I said earlier that if Jesus came again, as he did before, we’d kill him.

We like our concept of Jesus – our caricature of Jesus.

Because the Jesus many people know 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 Jesus who came as a baby, died for us, went back to heaven and prays for us and largely leaves us alone.

But that is only a caricature – The real Jesus is holy – transcendent – wholly other, the awesome mystery.

I have 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, 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 Jesus is THE holy God, then everything people believe instead of him is useless.

If Jesus is THE awesome mystery, then other gods are figments of imagination.

If Jesus is THE transcendent God then he has a claim on our lives that will not allow us to go on in life as usual.

If he is Holy then I am at his mercy and he is sovereign not me.

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.

When Leonardo deVinci 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 Jesus’ transcendent holiness. And it calls us to humility.

Of Charles Lamb the English essayist it was written:

“One time having fun with some friends, the question was asked how we would feel if some of the greatest among the dead were to appear, suddenly in the flesh again. Then one asked, “And what if Christ were to enter the room?”

At that Lamb’s countenance changed and as was his manner when he deeply moved, he stuttered, “You see if Shakespeare entered we should all rise; but if Jesus appeared, we must kneel.”

That raises **the second characteristic** of Jesus’ holiness.

I have spoken thus far of his transcendence.

I turn now to **his purity**.

There is a moral excellence about Jesus that disallows even thoughtful critics of Christianity to be critical of Jesus.

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 the deep dark mystery of human existence, the stumbling block to reason, the problem of problems, 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 Christmas story, “The Greatest 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, 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 mis-statements 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 smeared with guilt.

David, who sang the noblest songs of holiness, was himself 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.

It is this purity, which makes him to us **most attractive** and most repulsive.

I earlier said that if Jesus 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.

Imagine if Prince Charles of Great Britain was visiting our city and asked spontaneously to visit the home of a commoner.

Assume that they selected your home.

Further assume that you were out in the back yard dressed in an old pair of shorts and dirty t-shirt that you wouldn't want to be caught dead in.

Then one of your children appears with the future King of England in tow to introduce you.

You'd be one of the most self-conscious people alive at that moment.

You'd feel conspicuous, ashamed, and more than a little embarrassed.

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 who Jesus truly is.

Standing in Jesus presence in that smelly fishing boat, Peter instantly felt self-conscious, embarrassed, conspicuous, and ashamed.

Standing the presence of Perfection, 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, incredibly sad.

In the letter the woman told of her pain of standing before Jesus with all of the sin of an unbreakable habit.

She repeatedly confessed with tears of anguish only to return to her immoral conduct again and again.

As I read the letter, I could feel the torment of her soul.

She said she' rather die than keep going through this.

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 have known that feeling, too many times.

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.

“That same holy Jesus before whom you stand so indicted is the one who died for that very sin against which you now struggle.

“Don't be afraid. He will forgive you.”

As you come to him confessing your sin and your need for his forgiveness and grace – he will not leave you.

Jesus' purity makes us keenly aware of our own impurity.

But Jesus purity is what also makes it possible for us to be forgiven.

Purity and his transcendence describe the holiness of Jesus.

How do we respond to such a Jesus?

Humility and confession are the proper responses.

Kneel with me as I close our time together in prayer.