

Holy, Holy God

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[0 : 00] Eugene Peterson, who paraphrased the Bible into what's now called the Message, wrote this about Old Testament prophets.

We humans keep looking for a religion that will give us access to God without having to bother with people. We want to go to God for comfort and inspiration when we're fed up with the men and women and children around us.

We want God to give us an edge on the dog-eat-dog competition of daily life. This determination to get ourselves a religion that gives us an inside track with God but leaves us free to deal with people however we like is age old.

It's the sort of religion that has been promoted and marketed with both zeal and skill throughout human history. Business is always booming.

It's also the sort of religion that the biblical prophets are determined to root out. They are dead set against it. Because the root of the solid spiritual life is embedded in a relationship between people and God.

[1 : 22] It is easy to develop the misunderstanding that my spiritual life is something personal between God and me. A private thing to be nurtured by prayers and singing, spiritual readings that comfort and inspire and worship with like-minded friends.

If we think this way for very long, we will assume that the way we treat people we don't like or who don't like us has nothing to do with God.

That's when the prophets step in and interrupt us, insisting that everything you do or think or feel has to do with God.

Every person you meet has to do with God. It is basic to our humanity that we perhaps try to make that separation between what is going on between ourselves and God spiritually and what we do with other people.

But in scripture, both Old and New Testament, there can be no such separation. Remember, Jesus himself was cornered over this when he was asked, what's the most important commandment of all?

[2 : 40] Jesus said, love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. And love your neighbour as yourself. And he said that second one is like the first.

In other words, we can't separate, we must not separate those two things. They're part of the whole. You can't do one without the other. You can't have one without the other. And yet, how often we try. Isaiah got into a lot of trouble for saying the words that have just been read now. Because they were considered a scandalous claim. Let's hone in on one thing in particular that he says.

Your appointed festivals I hate with all my being. He is claiming that this is what God is saying to God's people as God's people offer their worship to God.

I hate your appointed festivals with all my being. Even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. Now that seems like a totally black and white contradiction with what we read elsewhere in scripture.

[3 : 47] Where it is precisely God. Where it is precisely God. And God alone who instigates those festivals. And God who invites his people to pray. And yet, here, Isaiah is saying that God wants nothing to do with it.

Why? Well, the point is, is that all the while the people were offering their religious activity to God in organized worship, there was corruption, there was oppression of the poor, tolerance of the most profound injustices, a preoccupation with material prosperity, a disregard for the marginalized and violent crime.

Now this was targeted to the context of the people of Israel at that point in time. But you know, whatever group of people we are talking about, whether collectively, at any time in history, or whether we're talking about us as individuals, the same universal truths apply.

That worship means nothing if we disregard our relationships with those around us. We cannot separate, and we must not separate, even though we try to, our relationship with God with the relationship that we have with those around and about us.

We can't. There was a Peanuts cartoon a few years ago, Charlie Brown. Charlie Brown was in conversation with his sister, and his sister says, I hate everything.

[5 : 25] I hate everybody, and I hate the whole wide world. And Charlie Brown replies, But I thought you said you had inner peace. And his sister replies, I do have inner peace, but I still have outer obnoxiousness.

Isaiah presents us with this challenge and calls us back to this challenge, that to love God is to love people, to love people is to love God, and you cannot separate the two. And it is born out of a vision.

Isaiah chapter 1 begins, we're saying that this is a vision that Isaiah has had. We see that in more detail, explained a few chapters later on, in Isaiah chapter 6, where Isaiah has this vision of the Almighty God.

He is engulfed with a sense of the presence of the holiness. And to bring it back to our series now, Names of God, here we hear that the words, Holy, Holy, Holy God.

But what does that word mean? It's too hard to put into words, but it's trying to describe through language, something that you can't describe through language.

[6 : 39] It's just that Isaiah's experience was one of just being confronted with the presence of God, with a dazzling light, a sense of the presence of utter, utter holy otherness.

But God is so pure and so loving, so perfect and so brilliant, that if he dared to look upon God, he would be consumed. And in that vision that is spelt out in more detail in Isaiah chapter 6, we're given this picture of how God's presence is surrounded by heavenly beings who have to cover their own eyes, because even the heavenly beings cannot look on God and live, because God is so perfect and so holy.

Think or try to think of what the most absolute sense of perfect love is. And we begin to get onto that track as to what we're talking about here.

Such perfect love that were we to meet it face to face, we'd go up in a puff of smoke. And yet by grace, the message of Scripture is that we can encounter that.

And Isaiah encounters the holiness of God, and it's with that vision that he knows that you cannot encounter that absolute love of God and yet hate those that are around you.

[8 : 05] And so that call to holiness is that call to love those around us unconditionally. And yet the problem Isaiah says in the words of prophecy is that in verse 4 of this chapter he says that the people had turned their back on God's holiness.

You know, we live thousands and thousands of years after these words were written and yet the same truths of our humanity remain. We can have an encounter with the living God and yet almost unwittingly we can turn our backs on that reality.

We can even come to church, we can be involved in our worship services, involved with church during the week, we can read our Bibles, we can pray, and yet and yet it's all too easy for us to turn our back on that fundamental truth that the one who we claim to love and who loves us.

That relationship cannot and must not ever be separated from the relationships that are going on all around us. Let's just think what might we need to be very careful of as we think about what this means in our ordinary lives.

What might be some of the warning signs where almost unwittingly we turn our backs away from the one who is holy who calls us to love not just him but those that are around us because they're inseparable.

[9 : 38] The first thing, the first warning sign here is this, that we must beware the danger of divorcing our everyday life from our worshipping Christian lives.

Faith and everyday life belong together. They must never be separated. There's a story about an old story from the American West, the old West where a minister was placed in a frontier town and he was down by the river one day and saw a number of people hauling logs out of the river and then saw that they were cutting the ends of the logs off.

On the ends of the logs were stamped the names of the owners of these logs. But he was horrified that it was actually his own members of his own congregation that were doing this, cutting the ends off the logs.

So the next Sunday he was just going to preach a sermon, really, really powerfully focused sermon on the message Thou shalt not steal. And he did.

And just as they were leaving church each member of his congregation walked past, shook his hand and said fantastic sermon pastor. He thought this message is clearly not sunk in.

[10:59] So the next week he not only preached his sermon pretty much word for word the same on the message Thou shalt not steal but also he worded all of his prayers around that theme and as much as he could try to grab as many of the words through the hymns and the way he introduced those hymns that were all around this theme you must not steal.

End of the service exactly the same response. People walked past smiled and politely shook his hand and said fantastic service pastor. The third week he did exactly the same thing again with Thou shalt not steal right at the centre of not just the sermon and the prayers but the whole service except at the very end he concluded Thou shalt not cut the ends off thy neighbour's logs.

They fired him. The point is is Christian faith is not an abstract concept.

Well it can become one and there's the problem. We totally miss the point if we think that Christian discipleship being a follower of Jesus is just something we can do in abstract terms when we detach it we remove it from our everyday lives whatever we're doing.

The second thing that we need to watch out for is the way that we talk with people with all people all of the time.

[12:29] The story I'm about to tell you is a true story it happened a long way away from here and I'm pretty confident that you would not know anybody in this story so I'm safe but it was a number of years ago and I was at a Christian gathering with a load of other ministers and we had a keynote speaker who was presenting through the course of the afternoon.

I can't remember what he was speaking on now it was that good but I can remember he led the whole of the afternoon session. The day ended and I went to get the train back and I was sat on the bench at the station the train was running late everybody was frustrated and I could overhear and the reason I could overhear was it was particularly loud and vocal somebody on the platform really laying into a member of staff now everybody was frustrated and I don't think anybody would have disagreed with the person's sense of frustration over the fact that the train was running late not that there was necessarily anything inherently wrong with expressing dissatisfaction but the way this particular individual was speaking to this member of staff was as though he was talking to the scum of the earth.

It was cringeful and it was very very loud and it was so so bad that it caused me to look up and it was at that point that I thought I recognised the voice and to my horror it was the same keynote speaker that had just been speaking to us as a group of Christian leaders for the whole afternoon. It simply won't do if we feel that we can separate the way we talk when we're in a Christian gathering with the way we talk with others throughout the week in our ordinary everyday lives.

And one of the ways we need to keep a really close focus on not turning our backs on the holiness of God is no matter how frustrated we might feel in our everyday lives to see the presence of God before us in each and every conversation.

[14:58] No matter how frustrated we might be feeling. The third final way I just want to share with you that I think is really important that we need to keep an eye on in the widest sense is our lifestyle.

Now I realise it's a really broad thing but it can mean all sorts of different things for each one of us and each of us will probably struggle with something or another in our lifestyle but to pay really close attention to those things, those patterns of our own behaviour that can slip in in our everyday life whereby we can without even realising we're doing it turn our backs on the holiness of God and the presence of God who is there in each and every hour of our lives.

Because the thing is that to use that word in scripture sin which is an old fashioned word but is a word that goes right to the heart of what the problem is, that sin does not come with flashing lights of warning.

it's so much more subtle than that to the point that we can engage with things that we don't even realise in a way that we're not even aware of doing. I probably shared this story before but I'm going to do it again because I think it's a helpful picture even though it's a slightly gruesome one.

Years ago apparently there was a way that in some parts of the world wolves were captured in very cold climates. Apparently what they would do is they would take a blade and they would kill another animal and get its blood somewhere and then they would dip this blade in the blood and freeze it so you've got like a layer of blood frozen around this blade.

[16:44] And then they do it again, they dip it into some blood and refreeze it and then again and again and again building up frozen layer upon frozen layer of blood around this knife until eventually you are left effectively with a block of frozen animal blood with a knife in the middle.

And they would put this in the snow and leave it overnight. A wolf would come along, catch a whiff of the blood and begin to lick. As the wolf would lick the blood, the more it got, the more it wanted. The more it wanted, the more it got and so it would just lick away, lick away, lick away at the frozen blood just craving for more all the while. The more it got, the more it wanted and yet it could not actually satisfy because the more it got, the more it wanted and it would lick away layer after layer after layer of the frozen blood until eventually all of the frozen blood was gone and the wolf was licking away at the animal, not at the animal blood but at the blade inside.

And as its tongue would lash away at the naked blade of this knife, so the wolf without realising would be consuming not the frozen blood but its own blood as it choked to death on its own blood. And then the people would come along the next day and find one knife in the snow next to one dead wolf. And I know that whenever you hear this story you never ever want to go near one of those strawberry flavoured split ice creams again.

[18:17] That's how sin works in that it's always, always subtle.

Whatever type of sin we're talking about and that is why we need to pay such close attention to our lifestyle. It's so easy for us to think to ourselves you know, I can just slow down on this rather than stopping.

But that never works. I read of a story of another part of the world where somebody was out driving their car and they were meant to stop at a stop junction.

They didn't, they slowed down. They didn't realise the police car was behind them. They were pulled over for it. They were pretty cocky and as a police officer came over there and said you should have stopped there but you just slowed down.

They came back with all this stuff, oh come on, you know, there's no big deal between slowing down and stopping. I mean, give me a break, go after somebody who deserves to be arrested.

[19:23] There's no real difference after all between slowing down as I did and coming to a complete stop. At which point the officer yanked them out of the car, threw on the cuffs, threw them up against the wall and they shouted back stop.

The officer said, well do you mean stop? Or shall I just slow down? It might seem a subtle distinction but it's a vital one for us to pay attention to those areas in our lifestyle and I guess for each and every one of us there will be something that we struggle with, whatever it might be. and to know that there is a difference between just doing a bit less of something and actually stopping. I'm going to finish as we come to pray, as we reflect on what that might be.

I'm going to finish by really a quotation for somebody called Josh Billings, who really in these few words highlighted the danger when we allow things to just roll on in our own lives without having the courage to grasp the nettles and invite the sheer holiness of God to take command.

Here's the quote, listen carefully. It is much easier to repent of sins that we have committed than to repent of those we intend to commit.

[21:08] Let's pray. Let's take a few moments of stillness.

And in the stillness we hold the reality of our lives before God. Knowing that each and every one of us is broken.

Nobody is perfect. God knows our hearts and he knows the patterns of our lives and he knows those things that we struggle with.

And that invitation to confess our sin to God is not an invitation to be condemned. It's an invitation to be transformed by his holiness.

To know that you are loved unconditionally and in the presence of his holiness to be transformed and to go on being transformed. and to know that there is nothing that is beyond the transforming power of God's love and holiness.

[22:17] So in this moment of stillness let's be courageous and bring our whole lives before God including those bits that we would perhaps pretend were not there.

Bring before God our relationships the ones that we struggle with. Bring before God our thought life our habits the workplace our homes in the stillness of this moment I invite us all to join together in the words of confession that are on the screens.

Let's pray together this simple prayer. Holy everlasting and forgiving Lord have mercy on me deliver me from my sin and renew a right spirit within me.

Amen. May the God of love and power forgive us and free us from our sins and restore us in his image to the praise and glory of his holy name through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.