



The Holiness of God in the Secular City

Isaiah 6:1-6

Picking up in our series, *Glory: The Weight of God's Perfections*, we're taking a look at the topic of holiness. Holiness is a polarizing word. For some, it's good and desirable but out of reach. You may think of God's holiness with admiration but feel shame and unworthiness if you linger too long. For others, holiness isn't quite good. It may off-putting, undesirable. You may think of holiness as prudish, religious, or restrictive of your freedom. What is holiness? Does it really matter? If so, how should we practice it? Let's look at these three questions: 1) Why does holiness matter? 2) What is holiness? 3) How do we respond to it?

Why Does Holiness Matter?

Holiness matters for the flourishing of cities. In his book *The City: A Global History*, Joel Kotkin traces the history of great, urban centers. He notes that all great cities have three qualities in common. They are sacred, safe, and busy. Busy, because they have thriving economies to provide goods and services for their citizens. Safe, because they have armies or police to secure protection of the city. Sacred, meaning they had a religious center of gravity that provided moral vision for the flourishing of the city, that gave it a sense of what is good and right. But today, one of these crucial elements is slipping away—the sacred. With the rise of the secular city, we have very busy and remarkably safe cities. But a sense of the sacred has slipped away, and with it a strong moral vision. Now, looking at the volunteerism and sheer number of non-profits in Austin you might contend with this thesis. After all, AMPLIFY Austin just finished an incredibly successful campaign, pulling in 2.8 million in 24 hours. There's a lot of social good going on. The homeless are cared for through the Arch. The abused are counseled and protected through Safeplace. We have the third lowest crime rate. This is incredibly good...*but it is not enough*. Why? **Because social good treats the symptoms of social ill without addressing the source of social ill.** Nonprofits care for victims of sexual abuse, but they can't prevent sexual abusers. They feed the already homeless, but can't change the circumstances that led to homelessness. Underneath social ill, there is moral ill. The city needs more than social good; it needs moral vision. If people had better sexual ethics, abuse would decline. If people were less angry, less crime. If we were less lustful, families wouldn't break up. Our cities need moral good. How can the city get a strong, consistent, moral vision? From the sacred. From the church. Prior to his sacred encounter, Isaiah prophesied against the city of Jerusalem for her excess and greed—excessive houses, sprawling vineyards, and heavy drinking. They loved live music and partying *hard*: “**They have lyre and harp, tambourine and flute and wine at their feasts, but they do not regard the deeds of the Lord, or see the work of his hands**” (5:12). This led to a lot social inequality. They spent freely on themselves but not on others. But the problem ran deeper than excess: “**Woe to those who call evil good and good evil**” (5:20). Jerusalem had a moral crisis. Conservatives call good evil; they demonize God's gifts like wine, good culture, and so on. *They build their identity on avoiding certain things and people*. They are no better than the liberals. Liberals call evil good; *they build their identity on excess of certain things*, exalting and twisting God's gifts of sex, alcohol, wealth, intellect, and entertainment. Both are of great concern, but for our church, and our city, Im

concerned with our tendency to call evil good. If you honestly examined your TV viewing, internet surfing, movie selections, interpersonal relationships, and weekend activities, where would you line up? Are you calling evil good? We are supposed to be salt and light, a city on the hill, but are we plain and dark? Surely there is a better place to build your identity—and the moral vision of the city—than the dearth or excess of cultural goods! We need the vision of Isaiah. We're told his vision occurred during the year Uzziah died. Uzziah was a great ruler and administrator but a poor worshipper. The houses got bigger, start-ups expanded, and military was great. It was safe and busy, but it wasn't sacred. The city was thriving on the outside but rotten on the inside. Are you like the city? Busy and safe not sacred? Are you devoted to activity and security but flippant about holiness? *How will the city recover moral vision for sexuality and wealth when the church lacks sexual and material holiness?* Like Israel, we lack holiness. We call evil good and good evil because we lack sacred space. **Not sacred spaces in our city but sacred space in our hearts.** We need, the city needs, holiness.

What is Holiness?

What is holiness? Isaiah 6: "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!" What is holiness? God is holiness. He saw the Lord, literally "the Sovereign" sitting on a throne high and lifted up. Why? Because God is better than all humanity. Even the best of kings can't compare. Here we have the **sacred King**. He sits; everyone else stands. He is high and lifted up. We are low and bowed down. From his place of grandeur and sovereignty, his robe fills the temple. This picture is cosmic. God is so great that his throne has to be in the heavens and his robe fills the earth. One commentator captures the spirit of this vision when he writes: "The description of God's appearance can rise no higher than the hem of his robe." His holiness is so great, Isaiah's eyes can't make it past the hem of his garment. He is bowed low. God is immense. We are tiny. The seraphim join him. The Lord is flanked by mysterious creatures, who also cover their faces and feet in God's holy presence. They are struck with wonder from head to toe. And wonder is expressive. It can't help itself. Exclaiming in antiphonal chorus, these angelic beings sing back and forth over the greatness of the King: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts." Threefold repetition is the highest form of emphasis in Hebrew. What is holiness? God is holiness, and holiness is distinctness, separate. God is utterly distinct, in another class, in another world, a whole other form of being. Theologians used to use a term to describe God that has fallen out of use, *aseity*. It means "a state of being by itself." The aseity of God. With the loss of sacred space, we have lost sacred language. What is holiness? Holiness is God. And what the city needs, and we need, is holiness not morality. Holiness is not morality. Holiness is being set apart; morality is being good. The problem with this is "good" is constantly changing. What was considered moral fifty years ago is no longer a matter of morality but preference. This shows up in our views on human life, sexual ethics. How can we be outraged by a cyclist doping and not give a rip about the abortion of human life? Our morality changes because it is based on human perception. Holiness remains the same because it is based on divine

nature. Holiness is consistent; morality is relative. See, morality isn't enough for the city because morality is gauged on a horizontal scale. It has no true north. It is culturally relative. But holiness is gauged on a vertical scale. Holiness is true north. It is normative across cultures. So holiness condemns evil wherever it shows up, conservative or liberal, in the church or in the city. Why? Because it is out of line with God, it is a perversion of his beauty, a twisting of his goodness, a parasite on shalom.

How do we Respond?

How, then, do we respond to holiness? **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!"** **First, we repent; we turn from our un-holiness and turn to his holiness.** We acknowledge our woes and sins before a holy God. When God sits, it implies judgment. We receive his judgment and recognize that we are lost apart from him, with no moral compass. We *confess* our sins to him. Don't hide your sins in the dark. That is where judgment and shame linger. Bring them out into the light, where forgiveness and healing happen. David wrote that when he kept silent his bones wasted away but when he acknowledged his sin to God, he said "Blessed (happy) is the one whose sin is forgiven." (Ps 32:1) Repentance brings us into blessing of God. How is forgiveness possible? It is possible because God takes the burning coal from the altar and touches it to our mouths saying: **"Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for"** (6:6). So how does a burning coal take away our guilt? This coal is taken from the altar. The altar was the place of sacrifice. There the priest placed his hand on the lamb, symbolically transferring Israel's sins to the lamb, and then slit its throat. And the blood was sprinkled on the altar and on the *coals*. Judgment falls on the lamb. Guilt is absorbed. Sin atoned for. **Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world** (John 1:29). **The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin**" (1 John 1:7). The blood-stained coal, applied to our lips, absorbs our guilt, and injects God's grace. When temptation comes knocking, remember the coal. When excess is attractive, remember the cross. When religion starts whispering, remember Christ. Turn to the holiness of God. **Second, keep looking at the Holy.** The reason Isaiah was moved to repent wasn't **because he was looking at his moral failures; it was because he was gazing and God's moral excellence.** His awareness of sin, he says, is because—for—**for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!** His sense of uncleanness is in direct response to God, not morality. Therefore his hope of cleanliness is a direct result of God, not morality. His eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts. **A major reason we lack holiness is because we aren't looking at the King of Glory.** We take our eyes off of him and ogle other things. Look at the Lord. **Sacred space is created by encounters with a sacred King.** When we remain under his rule and trust his wisdom, we make holy choices. But when we submit to the reign of cultural goods, and trust in their fleeting promises, we make unholy choices. When you're stressed, you don't need more drink or more entertainment. You need more God. When you're lonely, you don't need false intimacy you need Christ's intimacy. Sacred space is created by encounters with the sacred king. Pull out your Bible, open up your prayers, and keep looking at the holy. The more we look at the Lord the less we will look at our sin. And the less we look at our sin, the more our city will flourish. We will get underneath social ill to



treat the spiritual ill by keeping our eyes on the Sacred. When holiness increases, the city flourishes. Oh to raise families and make disciples who love to look at Holiness. Sacred space comes from looking at a sacred King.