

Preaching the God-centered Gospel in a Man-centered World (Part two)

By Jay Wegter

Our God-centered gospel means that our thoughts and affections must be regularly ‘tuned’ to God’s great purpose of sharing His holiness. God’s transcendent holiness is what He desires to communicate to two orders of creatures, humans and angels. Both orders of creatures were formed by God to receive the communication of this holy glory. We are created in the image of God to be worshippers so that our logical, reasonable, rational, spontaneous response to God’s transcendent holiness communicated to us is worship (Is 6:3).

Only those that come to a saving knowledge of God have any clue as to the weight of what it means to be an image-bearer of God. The sheer weight of carrying His image is beyond calculation. Consider that your creational identity and calling is to reflect the holy character of your Creator. “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts *which were yours* in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all *your* behavior; because it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (1 Pet 1:14-16). As His image and likeness, we honor Him by being a mirror or reflector of His righteousness and love. “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma” (Eph 5:1-2).

When God begins to awaken a spiritually dead sinner, that man’s conscience receives the very first wounds from the Law of God; he begins to understand that his sin profanes and dishonors God’s character. This means that our transgressions are telling lies about who God is, for they completely misrepresent Him by casting aspersion on His character. “I will vindicate the holiness of My great name which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst” (Ez 36:20-21, **23a**).

The discovery of the true knowledge of God, the Holy One, is traumatic to a sinner. For, man’s defection from God is so complete that the true knowledge of God is by nature, provocative, devastating, incendiary because this knowledge exposes just how abnormal man is. One theologian described our fallenness in this way: ‘imagine a shipwreck so devastating that the profile of the ship is unrecognizable, all that it left is debris on the surface of water’. What a picture of a mankind exchanging his created role as a worshiper for that of an idolater. In the garden of Eden the serpent laid the foundation for all idolatry and atheistic human

philosophy. The evil one's lie was an attempt to normalize rebellion in man's mind and heart, and to even normalize death itself. So, axiomatically, when the sinner is convicted of sin, having been confronted with the knowledge of God, it produces trauma and shock. Thus, this foundation or understanding of the human condition is essential and vital as the proper backdrop to understanding God's grace and its necessity.

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest (Eph 2:1-3).

Therefore, in light of our ruin by sin, the greatest gift imaginable to transgressors is the free reception of holiness from God who is transcendent in holiness. “Nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified” (**Gal 2:16**; 1 Thess 1:9; Titus 2:14). This God-approved righteousness, freely given, illuminates why the spurning of God's mercy results in damnation (2 Thess 1:7-9; 2:10-12). It sheds additional light on the enmity in man's heart, namely that his unbelief screams, “Please stop being God, please stop being transcendent in holiness!” And, “What the Bible says about You is too searching and invasive, too intimidating, guilt-producing, and terrifying to my conscience.” So, like Adam who hid from God in the Garden, the sinner seeks a hiding place, “I learned in the ‘science’ of psychology that my personal well-being means that I ought to steer clear of anything that makes me feel badly.”

Because God is infinite in His being and in His holiness, there is a certain devastation when the sinner encounters God through his infallible Word. The unbeliever's natural response is to seek to insulate himself from divine condemnation by one of four judgment-avoidance strategies. 1) He practices denial of the truth (preferring to revel in his own opinion of things). 2) He escapes by retreating into a host of diversions and distractions. 3) He expresses his opposition to God's authority and right to judge by open defiance toward God and His claims. 4) He seeks to appease God by legal and religious working (by self-righteousness). Each of these failed strategies to avoid judgment is a rejection of the priceless gift of

God's Son, and therefore constitutes the renunciation of God's own Person and the repudiation of His transcendent holiness.

By radical contrast, those whom God redeems become His friends (Jn 15:14, 15) and His co-workers in the world, laborers in 'God's field' (1 Cor 3:9). The Lord sends them out as ambassadors of reconciliation. With the appropriate pleas, these ambassadors are sent out with the urgent message, 'be reconciled to God'! (2 Cor 5:18-21). For, God has paid an immense price to establish the terms of peace between Himself and sinners. He has borne all of the cost of peace on His side. In immeasurable expense to Himself He has borne our offenses on His side, charging the guilt of our offenses to His beloved Son. And, now the basis of the free invitation of the gospel to sinners is that God's wrath is fully satisfied on behalf of all who believe the Son, and thereby obey the gospel (Rom 3:23-26). For, Christ's perfect life and sacrifice have fashioned a God-approved righteousness by which to clothe the naked, shivering sinner (Rom 10:4; Phil 3:9). To receive this blood-bought righteousness, not only reconciles the sinner, but also exalts God's love, justice, and holiness (Eph 1:6). Through Christ, the believing sinner becomes 'right with God's righteousness'—all to the glory of God. These are the elements of the gracious covenant which establishes the believer's love relationship with God.

In our man-centered age, Christianity has gradually drifted toward a reductionist definition of the gospel, as if the message of the gospel is but a wonderful plan or proposition; an 'opportunity' which provides insurance against hell. What has been relegated to the margins in the modern gospel is the transcendent holiness of God and the lordship of Christ. In the modern gospel, the kingdoms of light and darkness are not placed into bold relief. By way of correction, the stark contrast in kingdoms is captured in the following passage: "For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1:13, 14). These two kingdoms constitute, or represent two opposing loyalties. The respective destinies of these two kingdoms could not be more marked. Our Lord alludes to this when He stated that His coming will bring a sword of division. In first Century Jerusalem, the religious formalists imagined that Messiah would unify Abraham's descendants with a message of political power and victory. But, our Lord states that He came to bring a sword, which would produce division even between the most intimate family members (Mt 10:34). According to our Savior, the issue of right-relatedness to Christ's Person would literally divide the entire human race. The division would be between the reconciled friends of God, and the obstinate enemies

of God (Col 1:21).

Apart from the diagnostic work of Scripture laying bare the rebellion of man, we are unable to discern just how much the sin disease produces alienation and the love of darkness. “This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God” (Jn 3:19-21). This love of darkness, if it ends in impenitence, is spiritual suicide. Only the effectual call and the new birth, can conquer man’s propensity to cling to his imagined autonomy (Rom 8:28, 30; 1 Thess 2:11-14; 1 Pet 2:9; 5:10).

Scripture describes this stubbornness as walking according to the course of this world and following the prince of the power of the air (Eph 2:3). Christ died for this vileness in order to bring His elect to the Father. “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless” (Eph 5:25-27). A glorious feature of Christ’s lordship is the efficaciousness of His sacrifice, for by His finished work, He will effectually call and redeem all those given to Him by the Father. “This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day” (Jn 6:39, 40). “. . . and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified” (Rom 8:30).

Christ ‘obtained’ or achieved eternal redemption by His sacrificial death (Heb 9:12). This again highlights the weakness of today’s gospel since today’s gospel is commonly cast as merely a wonderful offer, and not the sovereign purpose of God to give a people to His Son (Jn 17:2-10). Oh the incalculable immensity of God giving Himself to His people in, and through His Son. This communication of God’s glory in the face of Christ was necessary so that God’s transcendent holiness might be beautiful to us instead of appalling and terrifying (2 Cor 3:18; 4:6). For the sight of that holiness will be unbearable to the reprobate. “. . .they said to the mountains and to the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come,

and who is able to stand?’ ”(Rev 6:16-17).

There is but one safe place in the universe from which to behold God’s transcendent holiness. It is from the safety of being hidden in Christ, clothed in His imputed righteousness. In a sense, Christ has become the believer’s ‘observatory’ from which he or she may safely behold the glory of God’s moral majesty. “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18). But, we cannot adore what we do not share in, and therefore we must be made like Him in order to enjoy him (2 Thess 2:13-14). “Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved” (Eph 1:4-6).

The world wants a god with *relative holiness* rather than absolute, transcendent holiness. The reason why is that a god of relative holiness would accept a relative righteousness in the creature. Paul identifies this tendency of self-righteousness in Romans chapter ten. “For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Rom 10:1-4).

Our God who is transcendent in holiness cannot deny himself, He will not make adjustments to His own holiness to keep the creature out of hell. For, He is immutable and unchanging, therefore we are the ones who must change, and be changed. Because of our enmity and helplessness, it is only God who can provide the change of status and the change of our natures. This is why He has sent his Son and, and it is why He commands gospel faith. The gospel is simple in its purity and beauty. The quickened sinner may rightly say, “God the Father gave His Son for my sins.” But only a person who is a ‘new creation’ (2 Cor 5:17) having experienced the effectual call and the new birth, can make this claim in truth, that God has given Christ for my sins.

God’s transcendent holiness confronts man, stopping him in his tracks. Through the rigor of the Law and through the scandal of the cross, man is ‘knocked of balance’ and staggered by what he cannot manage and control. No amount of *flight from judgment*, whether escape, defiance, or appeasement can quiet a man’s conscience—for the Law and the cross ‘stick there’ like painful briars. They speak of

God's transcendent holiness. They disturb the conscience with a portentous message that a day of accounting is coming—a day of destiny in which one's life will be evaluated in light of this holiness. Someday you will stand before this holy God, giving a comprehensive account. "But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment" (Mt 12:36).

The universe was made as a stage for the glory of God's moral majesty. This begs the question, how can fallen, polluted man find solace in God's purpose to eternally display His transcendent holiness? Every true believer knows the answer: *the cross makes the sinner beautiful to God and the cross makes God's holiness beautiful to the sinner.* For only in Christ does the creature realize his created purpose. This is so succinctly stated in the Westminster Shorter Catechism: Q. What is the chief end of man? A. The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Is there anything about God's transcendent holiness that draws and enchants, or does it only terrify and repel you? Your answer will reveal whether or not you belong to Christ. Jonathan Edwards is incredibly lucid in these matters of God's holiness in connection with the sinner's salvation. The following observations made by Edwards are drawn from his magnum opus book, *The Religious Affections*.

Self-love in religion as our starting point can block us from true religion. Love to God starts with the affections perceiving the excellence of God's nature—self-interest will be secondary, but self-interest will be primary in the hypocrite.ⁱ

The believer's affections express true gratitude for who God is in Himself. In genuine salvation, the beauty of God's nature is unfolded. Our love is drawn out by His love to us first, but, the hypocrite's motivations never rise above self-love.ⁱⁱ

We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. We love, because He first loved us (1 Jn 4:16-19).

Concerning God's moral majesty, we love God for the beauty of His holiness; for His moral excellence—it is the starting point for the appreciation of all other virtues and attributes in God. Loving God's holiness is the only way to acquiesce to God's way of salvation.ⁱⁱⁱ

The nature we were born with is against God's holiness, therefore, delight in God's holy nature, without self-love coming first is a good test of true salvation.

The unbeliever may have some "spiritual perception" but he is blind to God's moral majesty (holiness).^{iv}

The Spirit's enlightening is needed in order to perceive and love the moral majesty of God. The new birth gives a new sense to perceive the beauty of divine things. The new birth is needed to see the beauty of holiness. The saint is lost in wonder at the suitableness of Christ for the sinner's dilemma. By contrast, because the sinner has no principle of grace, the hypocrite cannot put on the *grace garments* spoken of in Ephesians chapter four and Colossians chapter three.^v

Genuine assurance of salvation is joined to the absolute persuasion of, and beauty of divine things. The saint is ravished by the beauty of God's moral excellence. All of the gospel's doctrines depend upon God's holy beauty. Every part of the gospel has God's holy beauty in it. To "sell all" for Christ is the result of the powerful conviction of the truth of the gospel. Also, that conviction of the truth of the gospel gives the ability to suffer for the cause of Christ.^{vi}

All that God is toward me in Christ as spelled out in the word of grace, the gospel. The assurances of our Great High Priest in the gospel provide the boundless blessings of covenant love, and the safety necessary to behold God's holiness. And, as the believer keeps beholding the glory of the Lord (2 Cor 3:18), that experience produces the desire for imitating and adoring His holiness.

End Notes:

ⁱ Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections*, pp. 170-172

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, pp. 173-179

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, pp. 181-185

^{iv} *Ibid*, pp. 187-189

^v *Ibid*, pp. 192-203, 210

^{vi} *Ibid*, pp. 218-228, 231-233