



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Holiness Among Us

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A Distant Holiness?

I like the story of the little girl who did not want to be alone at bedtime and, in a stream of tears, implored her mother to stay in the room with her. Offering reassurance, her mother said, "You've got your doll. Your doll will keep you company." "When I'm lonely," the child sobbed, "a doll is no good. I want someone with skin on her face."¹

We understand. The personal touch is important. Bible writers even made the motivation for holiness personal. For example, Peter taught that, in response to the temptation to conform to our culture, we are imitate God's holiness (1 Pet. 1:14-16; from Lev. 11:44-45). But, as helpful as it is to follow someone who says, "do as I do," there is a problem. God is so different that it is hard not to feel distant from him. Relative to holiness, we wonder whether he can really understand what we face when we are tempted to be unholy. After all, we are the ones in the trenches of moral decision making. Even when we accept that we can trust his directives because his understanding his understanding is unlimited (Isa. 46:10; Psa. 147:5) and therefore wise, and that his love is integral to his nature (1 John 4:8), we can feel distant from One who is so separated from us.

It would help more if God put skin on his face. What is most amazing about our faith is that it declares that he did just that! Remembering that is essential as we consider the call to be holy.

Some Particulars about Jesus

John immediately gets to the heart of this amazing claim. "The Word," which was "in the beginning," "was with God," and "was God" (1:1). He existed from eternity, was instrumental in creation, and is where men can find life and light (1:2-4). John the Baptist pointed people to him who "was in the world" even though "the world was made through him" (1:10). Remarkably, John assigns a *personal* identity to an impersonal entity that both Greek and Jewish thought had wrestled with for centuries. In broadest terms, "the Word" was thought to "signify that which gives shape, form or life to the material universe."² That understanding is conceptual,

¹ Ron Meacock, "The Evangelism Handbook," at <http://www.tellout.com/book/handbook4CA.htm>. Accessed November 13, 2014. I first read this story in the 1990s in Barbara Varenhorst's peer counseling materials.

² D. H. Johnson, "Logos," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 1st ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 481.

impersonal, and distant. But, incredibly, John says, “the Word became *flesh* and took up residence³ *among us*. We saw his glory . . .” (1:14, NET)! Verse 17 tells us the Word’s name: “Jesus Christ.” The rest of John reinforces this audacious claim, reporting such things as Jesus’ claim to be able to do what the Father does because, he said, he and the Father were one. That declaration nearly got him stoned for blasphemy (10:25-33).

Other New Testament writers don’t make the claim the same way John did, but they do not hesitate to say that Jesus was much more than an extraordinary teacher and prophet. They report with approval that demons recognized him as “the Holy One of God”, an attribution Jesus never rejected (Mk. 1:24 = Lk. 4:34). They urged Christians to “honor Christ the Lord as holy” (1 Pet. 3:15; (“honor . . . as holy” translates the verb, ἁγιάζω, *hagiazō*). They declared that he was “the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15).

They did not intend to suggest that Jesus only *appeared* to be human (1 Jn. 4:2-3; 2 Jn. 7), that he was impervious to the frailties and challenges we face. They did not present Jesus as Superman, but as a man like us in every way. He dealt with life as we must; was tempted as we are; suffered as we do. He even died as we will. But, he never sinned (Heb. 2:9, 14-18; 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:21-25). He was holiness with skin on his face.

Put another way, we have confidence that God understands what it means to ask us to be holy because in Jesus he has fully identified with us. He is somewhat (though not exactly) like *Undercover Boss*, the recent CBS television show where CEOs don a disguise and go undercover as an employee at the lowest level of their companies to learn what things are really like.

No wonder the New Testament declares that Jesus is the “one mediator between God and men” (1 Tim. 2:5). He mediated “a new covenant” between God and all people (Heb. 9:15; 12:24) and now intercedes as our advocate at the right hand of God the Father (Rom. 8:34; 1 Jn. 2:1-2).

A Model with Skin on His Face

Suppose someone could perfectly imitate the holiness of God. What would that look like? Jesus did just that. But, do we understand what that means for the call for us to be holy?

Go back to John where Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (Jn. 14:6). The way to what? He tells us: the way to the Father (see vv. 2-4). But what does that mean? How does one on the way to the Father *live*? Jesus shows us. What should one who would live that way *believe*? Only what is real, the truth, for that is what liberates us to be who we should be (Jn. 8:32). What should one who would follow that way *live for*? Only the things that matter “to have life . . . abundantly” (Jn. 10:10). Jesus says, I am all of these things. But he goes on to say, look at me; when you do, you will also see the Father — in all his holiness (Jn. 14:7-9).

Is it any wonder, that the apostles characterized the Christian life in terms of *learning Jesus* (Eph. 4:20), *imitating Jesus* (1 Cor. 11:1), and letting ourselves be transformed into the *image of Jesus*? That is what God knew beforehand and predetermined for the people he would call, justify, and glorify (Rom. 8:29-30). It’s what people live for who seek true freedom (2 Cor. 3:17-18). Because holiness has been among us, we can more clearly see what being holy as God is holy

³ “Took up residence” translates σκηνώω, *skēnoō*, “live, dwell (temporarily); literally live or camp in a tent; figuratively in the NT dwell, take up one’s residence, come to reside (among).” (Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*, Baker’s Greek New Testament Library [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000], BibleWorks, v.10.)

means.⁴ That should make us agreeable to accepting the call and the shaping God is doing to enable us to share his holiness (Heb. 12:3-11).

Called to Follow Jesus

While working as a school teacher, I was invited to be the assistant baseball coach for a time. I had played the game, enjoy watching it, and have a pretty good understanding of it. But, I had never coached it. So, I bought a book, *How To Coach Winning Baseball*, which included useful pointers for teaching players how to play the different positions. Since the head coach put me in charge of the outfielders, I focused on those sections.

What I read and learned proved helpful as I looked for ways to teach my players what good outfield play involved. But what was most helpful for them was when I could point them to someone, in person or on film, who had mastered outfield play. To best learn how to play the outfield, they needed an outfielder with skin on his face.⁵

We need the same thing to be holy. Thankfully, God made himself available in the person of Jesus. Look at him. Study him. Learn him — and from him. Above all, follow him.

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⁴ To illustrate the power of calling people to imitate Jesus, a youth minister told me several years ago about the instructions he gave his group before they left for a weekend retreat. Paraphrasing, he said, “There are no rules this weekend. All I ask is that all of you act at all times as Jesus would.” I suspect the chaperones going along became quite nervous, if not alarmed, at this announcement. However, the youth minister said that he had never had a group who cooperated or behaved as well as that group did that weekend.

⁵ Players who came along a few years later, after I stepped down as a coach, learned in a way they never could have learned from me. The dad in one of our families had retired from a seventeen-year career as an excellent Major League outfielder. In his retirement, he was more than willing to help out as a community coach. Needless to say, coaching outfielders was a big part of what our head coach asked him to do.