

ABSOLUTELY EXCELLENT AND PURE
Isaiah 6:1-8

I. INTRO

- A. If you could inherit someone's talent at the game of golf—would you choose *my* talent—or Tiger Woods? We **get** excellence, don't we? And you and I will choose it whenever we can! And we would choose excellence for our own lives as well—whenever we can. No one wants to be mediocre in life in places where it really counts!
- B. This longing for excellence is hard-wired into our lives. At the core, it is a longing for holiness. Oh, it's gotten corrupted into a passion for excellent things and excellent services—and gotten tainted with pride and greed and selfishness—but in its purest form, it is a longing for what the Bible calls holiness. Righteousness.

-Let me ask another question. When I say the word, **holiness**, what kind of feelings do you have? Has anyone here besides me ever in your life felt negative feelings about that word? I've thought about that a lot--and I think I know why.

1. I grew up in a church that talked a lot about personal holiness. My **impression** was for that the people who talked most about it the most, holiness was this judgmental mixture of sternness and pain. Anyone remember the old **Listerine** mouthwash? Well, I had this impression that holiness was kind of like **Listerine** mouthwash. It came in this plain-looking bottle wrapped in brown paper. It tasted awful and burned like fire--but it was necessary to kill off those nasty germs that caused bad breath. When I thought of God as being a holy God, I **interpreted** that in a bunch of ways. I tended, on my worst days, to think of Him as being the Martha Stewart of Heaven; fussy and picky—generally ticked off because people kept screwing up--me in particular. Because God was holy, I thought of him as stern and unapproachable.
2. I need to tell you--I couldn't have been **more** wrong. I was so far off-base on this--so far off. The Holiness of God is the most beautiful, excellent, praiseworthy quality you can imagine. And He offers to make His beauty and excellence **real** in our lives

II. GETTING IT RIGHT

- A. Perhaps one of the most astounding visions of God's holiness is found in **Isaiah 6:1-8**. **It was in the year King Uzziah died that I saw the Lord. He was sitting on a lofty throne, and the train of his robe filled the Temple. Attending him were mighty seraphim, each having six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. They were calling out to each other, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Heaven's Armies! The whole earth is filled with his glory!" Their voices shook the Temple to its foundations, and the entire building was filled with smoke. Then I said, "It's all over! I am doomed, for I am a sinful man. I have filthy lips, and I live among a people with filthy lips. Yet I have seen the King, the Lord of Heaven's Armies." Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 7 He touched my lips with it and said, "See, this coal has touched your lips. Now your guilt is**

removed, and your sins are forgiven.” Then I heard the Lord asking, “Whom should I send as a messenger to this people? Who will go for us?” I said, “Here I am. Send me (Isaiah 6:1-8 NLT).”

1. There are a couple of key things here in this passage. It's the calling of Isaiah, the prophet--maybe one of the greatest prophets who has ever lived. The king, Uzziah, has just died. Not only was he one of the greatest kings Israel ever had--a builder, a technological genius and a military genius, he had reigned for 52 years.

This great king had died at the worst possible time. The Assyrians were eating other nations for lunch and scaring the world half to death. See the combination? A great, wise king dies at a time when everyone's terrified of the future. What do you do when everything in your life is crumbling? When all you've based your future on is changing? When life holds more threat than promise? Well, you need to come to the throne room of the universe and see who **really** wears the crown. It was in this context that Isaiah has this amazing vision of the sovereignty and holiness of God.

- a. Let's take a brief look at this narrative. First of all, God is on the throne--high and exalted. He is the final authority. **Every** buck stops with Him. His splendor and majesty is so immense that seraphs, the magnificent angels who surround Him, can't look directly at Him. That's why this passage uses the imagery of them covering their eyes and their feet with their wings. Covering their feet was an act of absolute humility.
 - The interesting thing about these angels is that they cry, "Holy, Holy, Holy." Three times. R.C. Sproul has written about this.
 - In the Hebrew language, there were no capitals, no bold letters, and no italics like you would have in Microsoft Word--so to emphasize something that was extremely important, they would use repetition. Remember, Jesus often said, "Truly, truly I say to you..." Same thing.
 - What this triple repetition is saying is that holiness is raised to a level of ultimate importance. This is never done with any other characteristic of God. It's because holiness is at the very core of who God is.
- b. Now, the question is--what does it mean? Most Christ-followers would say, "Well, it means moral purity." And it does--but it's way, way more than that. At the very core of the Hebrew word, **qadash**, and the Greek word, **hagios** is the sense of something that is totally set apart, totally "other." Way different, far superior to **anything** you've ever seen.

-I think we sometimes see this as meaning that God is totally transcendent—meaning He's uninvolved, unengaged--a God who holds us at arms length--mainly because He sees us as disgusting sinners. **But**, His "otherness" is not in reference to His feelings about us--it's **Who He is**. The point is, there are no categories for Him. He's eternal, totally self-sufficient--not an "it"--but a Person of such splendor, beauty, omniscience and glory, we can't possibly imagine the awesomeness of seeing Him. Whenever humans catch a glimpse, they try to think of the most beautiful, costly things they've ever seen and wrap them into the imagery. And this passage says, "The **whole earth** is filled—and with his

glory." The earth is filled and even the universe can't contain it. **THAT'S WHO GOD IS! This very God we serve, who loves you and me.**

2. There's another really important part of this narrative you need to see. It's Isaiah's response when he is confronted with the holiness and glory and excellence of God. To some extent, it's a terrifying scene. In the presence of God, things just start to tremble and shake and fill up with smoke.

-And the only thing Isaiah can say is, "It's all over! I'm doomed." I want you to imagine Sept. 11, 2001—sitting in your office of the World Trade Center on the 76th floor, looking out your window, and seeing a 767 100 metres away. That would be the feeling. An awesome sight—but instant death. In a split second--in one glimpse of God, Isaiah's life--as good as he thought it was--gets crystal clear. The selfishness. Little acts of cruelty and pride. His true motives and desires--everything. Now that he has seen what true holiness is--he realizes the damage to his own soul. And the sight of it is totally devastating.
 3. God's response to this devastation--to keep this sense of utter sinfulness from destroying the prophet--is to send an angel with a red-hot coal off of the altar--to touch Isaiah's lips. Anyone here ever touched something that's red-hot with your mouth? Okay—more familiar example--anyone here ever burned the roof of your mouth on hot chocolate?

-Maybe the point is that there is a certain amount of pain to the things we've done that have offended God--and there's pain in owning it, grieving it. We sometimes think God's goal is to spare us pain--but the truth is, His goal is to redeem us. To make us like Him. Instead of this confrontation with himself--and purifying process scarring Isaiah--it purifies him. **"See, this coal has touched your lips. Now your guilt is removed, and your sins are forgiven (Is.6:6 NLT.)"**
 4. This next part is extremely important. I want you to notice that sharing in God's holiness is not so that we can just sit around and marvel at ourselves--brag even more about the things we **don't** do and how lucky God is to have people like us.

-God asks the question--the first words He speaks, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" Please understand. God isn't confused, "Wow! What am I going to do! This is tough, finding people." He's giving Isaiah a chance to step up to the plate and give himself fully. And he does. "And I said, **'Here am I. Send ME (Is.6:8 NLT)!**'" And God does. And this man who has seen the beauty, magnificence and awesomeness of God's holy presence is never the same. When you truly understand God's holiness--it just draws you in with its beauty and excellence. But you can't just stay there and look at it like a picture. You have to decide, "What am I going to do about me? What is God calling me to do?"
- B. The unfortunate thing is that Israel got the wrong idea about God's holiness--just like we do. For them, God's holiness--set-apart-ness, purity and splendor--made them want to put up fences and walls. His name was holy, so they wouldn't even say it. The Sabbath was to be kept holy--in other words, set apart--different than the other six days of the week where they sweated and worked from dawn to dusk. So, they put up fences. They created a detailed rulebook--about how many pebbles you could carry, about how far you could walk, about not putting ointment on sores, because if a wound was **healing** the wound would be **working**.

-Purity was defined as how far a person could carry this crushing load of rules. You could call it, ***adventures in missing the point!*** The heart, the part God is ***most*** concerned about—never changed.

1. That's why Jesus came. God in flesh. Perfectly pure and holy in all He did. And was it ever refreshing--and baffling. He didn't depart from the law that had been taught and written. Not at all. He just clarified it all--gave it meaning. And he trashed all the addendums and lists that religious people had created--even made fun of them on occasion.

-Jesus made it clear that holiness, purity, set-apartness comes from the ***interior*** of the human life--not from external washings, rituals, and rule-keeping. When the heart is truly and thoroughly changed, like a really good fruit tree, it brings good fruit.

-Know what got crystal clear with Jesus? How love and joy and peace and humility are tied into holiness. In his culture--and in some of what I've seen and you've seen defined as holiness, the old Tina Turner song fit, "What's love got to do with it?" Holiness became a source of pride, not humility.

2. When Jesus showed up as the glory and holiness of God in human flesh--it was beautiful and magnetic. The interesting thing is that it was beautiful to people who had failed big-time, screwed up their lives. Jesus treated them with care and dignity and compassion. It was so beautiful that prostitutes, crooks and cheats were drawn to Him. He was sarcastically called, ***the friends of sinners.***
3. Jesus cut through all the games, all the fences, all the religious scams--and went for the heart. He went after greed--said, "It's unnecessary. The Father will take care of you!" He condemned the use of divorce as a cover-up for lust. He declared hatred and vengefulness useless and destructive.

-Jesus answered Tina's question, "What's love got to do with it?" ***Everything!***
4. And the beauty of Jesus' life—and description of what life can be like--will never be forgotten. He took the complexity out of it. He spelled out--and lived out--what it looks like. Now we know that holiness is looking like Jesus, living like Jesus and loving like Jesus. ***Christ-likeness.***

I recently saw an interview with Richard Curtis—a well-known British film-maker and writer. He's still working through the details of his own faith—but says that he is blown away by the clarity and beauty of Jesus' teaching. This has inspired him to raise over 1 billion dollars to eliminate poverty. The world has never gotten over Jesus. Those who have sincerely Him have literally turned the world upside-down.

-But if you're into religion, ***faux holiness***, Jesus might make you made. He still does that to some. But if you're into heart-transformation—you'll be fascinated—and humbled!

- C. God doesn't want holiness and excellence to just define Him. His vision is one that includes us. He wants ***us*** to be whole! To not get stuck in life, but have power to change and grow. And that's amazing news. We can be excellent, like Jesus! And when we link

up as an excellent, holy community of Jesus-followers—we can make a **serious** difference in issues like poverty, HIV, injustice, child prostitution, racism, war—and a lot of the other trash that makes our world such a broken place.

III. GOD'S PLAN: TO INCLUDE US IN HIS EXCELLENCE

A. So, what does God's holiness in us look like? Really? And how does it happen? Down through the ages, holiness has had an image problem. I've already alluded to that. Maybe the most difficulty has come from the root meaning, **set apart**. The King James Version of the Bible, at one point, says, "You are to be a **peculiar** people." People took that and ran with it—like we were to literally, "be **weird** for Jesus!"

1. And the behavior of Jesus' followers **has** sometimes gotten very bizarre.

*There are records of hermits going into the desert and inflicting pain on themselves. One guy ate no cooked food for 7 years. Another slept naked in a marsh for 6 months—exposing his body to poisonous flies. Kinda makes you itchy doesn't it?

*One man spent 7 years suspended by his armpits from iron shackles so he could earn a better spot in heaven.

*Simeon Stylites built a pillar in the desert six feet high and lived on it. But he was ashamed because it was too low. So he built another one 60 feet high, 3 feet across with a railing around it to keep him from falling off. He lived there 30 years, exposed to the sun and wind and cold. There was a ladder up to it that allowed his followers to take him food and remove his waste. I think they got the worse end of that deal. He got written up in the history books for doing that—but I don't think it made him more like Jesus.

2. Holiness is beautiful. Self-denial—by itself—can make you proud, judgmental and unloving. When there's denial--and there is sometimes denial--it's reserving your desires for something better—like saying "no" to a Snicker's Bar because you know you're having filet mignon for supper.

a. Of course, the other aspect to holiness, besides excellence, is purity. And we understand purity. I'll prove it. Anyone here who's thirsty? I have two bottles of water. One's cold, one's room temperature. The room temperature one hasn't been opened. Which do you want? Just what I thought—the unopened one.

b. If we define **holy** as excellent, pure and set apart—in a class all by himself—how many of you would like a **holy** surgeon? Does it make a difference if a surgeon is excellent, in a class by himself—but doesn't wash his hands before surgery? Pure matters. We like **holy** restaurants; we want **holy** people caring for our children when we can't—right? Maybe we resist the idea of moral purity—as individuals, and as a community—because it seems so very far away!

3. Let me restate the most amazing and astounding news for you and me this morning. God wants for us—me and you to **share** in his holiness, his excellence, his purity. **We were created for excellence!**

-Don't worry, He knows that we're novices--He's a professional. He knows that we can't do this on our own, so He offers to come **into** our hearts and begin patiently repairing the damaged parts, restoring us to excellence, training us to live in new ways..

-Starting Sept. 9, we're going to study the book of 1 Corinthians—an ancient letter from Paul. Listen to what Paul says as he starts this letter:

To the church of God in Corinth, to those SANCTIFIED in Christ Jesus and called to be HOLY, together with those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ--their Lord and ours (1 Corinthians 1:2 NIV).

- a. First notice how he addresses these people: to *those sanctified*. Literally, this is translated *saints* or *holy ones*. He's addressing this to the community—to the whole people of God. The strange thing about that is that, if you read the rest of the book, Paul has to correct these people on division, lawsuits, sexual immorality, arrogance and inappropriate behavior in worship. He said, "Your communion services do more harm than good!" When he calls them *saints*, you want to ask, "What's **that** all about?"

-I'll tell you what it's about. It's about the fact that when we put our faith in Jesus Christ and exchange our sin for his pure and holy life--in God's eyes we actually become **saints**--perfect and holy. It means that our place in God's family is settled. What remains to be fixed is our tangled lifestyle.

- b. And that's what Paul addresses next. He says, "Okay, folks--you're **saints!** **Holy Ones. Set apart. Washed and purified forever. NOW GOD WANTS YOU TO COOPERATE WITH HIM POWER SO THAT YOU CAN GROW INTO YOUR NAME!**

- B. I want to ask you a really important question this morning. In fact, how you answer could have a profound impact on your future. Do you really believe that God sees you as holy and excellent—because of Jesus? That now He will help you to grow into a person of beauty and wholeness and purity—the person you've always dreamed that you could be? And, more importantly, is that, in fact, what you **want** for your life?

1. For that to happen you'll have to see things from a totally new perspective. That's what repentance means--to see life in a totally new way. That when God asks you to run from greed and selfishness and sexual impurity and pride and **toward** love, humility, patience, kindness and self-control, He's not being difficult to deal with. Holiness is God's life--a life that is free, healthy, pure in the right kind of way--a life well-lived; a life filled with joy and grace and excitement to be alive. It is a life that leads to satisfaction, not regret.

- a. How you **value** things has a profound effect on how you **treat** them. -For example. I saw a 1970 Ford Maverick the other day when I was running. Anyone remember the Maverick? It wasn't exactly made at the height of Ford's push for excellence. Well, if you have one--you won't mind

driving it over the river and through the woods. It gets a ding? Big deal. You put cheap gas in it--let the muffler go, cover the rust holes with duct tape. Leave old pretzel bags, stale French fries, stray socks and empty pop cans in the back seat. YOU think, "It doesn't **deserve** any better than this."

-What if you owned a \$275K Ferrari? You'd treat it differently, wouldn't you? You'd drive around mud puddles, not through them. You'd park it holy places—set apart from other junkier cars. You probably wouldn't change the oil in your driveway. The difference is the **value** you place on it. God says your soul...my soul...is the most valuable part of us. It's eternal! Wouldn't it be tragic if we treated our possessions better than our souls?

- b. What you believe to be true of your soul will have a profound effect on how you treat it. If you believe that it was meant for excellence and purity and the best of care--that will drive you to God for his power and help. That will push you to know and understand the owner's manual for the soul--the Bible.

You will understand that the excellence and purity with which your soul functions affects every single part of your life. Is **that** what you believe?

2. So. How does that happen? Well, God gives us supernatural power. In Romans 7, Paul, the author, talks about the ongoing struggle we feel with being stuck in life. Try...fail...regret; try...fail...regret. In the next chapter, he tells us we are not doomed to follow this old pattern. There is supernatural power from the Spirit of God that helps us say *no* to things that lead to death--and *yes* to things, that lead to life. The same Spirit of God that raised Jesus from the dead and seated Him at the right hand of the Father does this amazing job.

- a. Know what He needs most? He needs for us to offer all of us to all of Him so He has access to the parts of us that need changed. And then, He just needs our cooperation. He longs for us to bring to him the things that get a grip on our souls--greed, lust, jealousy, hard-heartedness, fear, bitterness--and just say, "I surrender. Here's my junk. And with your help, I will keep shoveling it out of my life. Just show me where it is!

-And I would not pretend that this is a painless process. We usually need the help of others who will hold us accountable; who will hold up the mirror so we can see ourselves. In fact, we are called to be an excellent community—living out compassion, grace, humility and service as a community. We are called to get the peer pressure going in the **right** direction! To live out our love for Jesus in a whole community of people determined to be like Jesus.

- b. It's actually a training process--and the Holy Spirit becomes your personal trainer. Remember, your **destiny** is settled--now He's just trying to help you live with excellence and purity--*really* live. And the Spirit of God is patient.

*He will not overwhelm and Shame you. He'll speak to you—one intersection at a time. The Spirit will put his finger on the source of the pain, which is usually our favorite, most stubborn habits. And then you and I

have a choice. We can **balk**. Deny that we need to change. "Not **me!**" Or **blame** on our problems on others. Or **procrastinate**. Sometimes we say, "Hmmm. You know, that's a good point. How about if we deal with this tomorrow. Tomorrow would be a **much** better day."

-Or, or we cooperate. We humble ourselves. Say, "God--I'm not sure if I can change--but I do want to share in your excellence. If you will give me the strength, I'll cooperate.

*And over time, with training, with His power, with our cooperation--we are transformed.

IV. **CLOSING**

God's plan for us is to become **excellent** people. People of character and integrity. A community that, through love and compassion and grace and peace-making—changes the world! It's what we were created for. Is that what **you** want?