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Tillamook, Oregon

You Must be Born Again!

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TULIP – The Fundamentals of the Faith by which we are Saved

Sermon #3 – More on Total Depravity – Holy, Holy, Holy

December 19, 2021

Sermon Text: Isaiah 6

Scripture Reading: Psalm 99

Heb 12:14 Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

This morning I want us to think further about this “T” in the acronym TULIP which as you recall stands for the doctrine of *total depravity*. The Canons of Dort, formulated by reformers in the Netherlands in 1618 state the doctrine this way:

Man was originally formed after the image of God. His understanding was adorned with a true and saving knowledge of his Creator, and of

spiritual things; his heart and will were upright, all his affections pure, and the whole man was holy.

But, revolting from God by the instigation of the devil and by his own free will, he forfeited these excellent gifts; and in the place thereof became involved in blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity, and perverseness of judgment; became wicked, rebellious, and obdurate in heart and will, and impure in his affections.

Man after the fall begat children in his own likeness. A corrupt stock produced a corrupt offspring. Hence all the posterity of Adam, Christ only excepted, have derived corruption from their original parent, not by imitation, as the Pelagians of old asserted, but by the propagation of a vicious nature, in consequence of the just judgment of God.

Therefore all men are conceived in sin, and are by nature children of wrath, incapable of saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage thereto; and without the regenerating grace of

the Holy Spirit, they are neither able nor willing to return to God, to reform the depravity of their nature, or to dispose themselves to reformation.

[Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries, Vol 4, Reformation Heritage Books, Dennison].

This canon or standard mentions Pelagius, so let me just briefly refresh your memory on the Pelagian heresy in regard to total depravity. The Canons of Dort include a rejection of errors following each standard:

“[Rejection those who teach]: that the unregenerate man is not really nor utterly dead in sin, nor destitute of all powers unto spiritual good, but that he can yet hunger and thirst after righteousness and life, and offer the sacrifice of a contrite and broken spirit, which is pleasing to God. For these things are contrary to the express testimony of Scripture: Eph 2:1,5; Gen 6:5; 8:21; Psalm 51:17; Matt 5:6.”

Salvation is, therefore, of the Lord. It is by grace through faith and that not of ourselves – it is the gift of God. There is no room whatsoever for us to boast.

Now, in his sin, man insists that this diagnosis is far too bleak – thus the false notions of Pelagius. His heresies are widespread with us today and this is

a chief reason why the visible church has so many people in its pews and preachers in its pulpits who in practice if not in letter embrace this theology:

Man is not so bad as that, and God is not so “good.” That is, man’s state is not so low, and God is not so high.

This is the mindset that drives idolatry. Man creates God in man’s own image, imagining that God has some creatureliness to His being. Similarly, man the sinner regards himself as in some sense divine. Bring God down, and raise man up. Man is driven by that devilish false promise – *you shall be as God.*

And yet:

Job 9:32 For he is not a man, as I am, that I might answer him, that we should come to trial together.

Num 23:19 God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?

Hos 11:9 I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

Man tends toward regarding God as a man, as a creature. Such an imaginary god is less terrifying, more manageable, *and, as we want to carefully consider now – not so holy*. The Bible however emphasizes hundreds of times that God, in the very essence of His being, is *holy, holy, holy*. And unless we understand that God is holy, we will continue to fancy that man in his sin is not so bad off after all. In fact, we will believe that the cross of Christ was not something that propitiated the wrath and justice of God against us, but surely it must mean something else. Only a holy, holy, holy God makes the cross necessary.

Years ago as I have probably told you before, I was teaching a Bible study on the attributes of God in a little log cabin library in Montana. It was one of the first times I used material from R.C. Sproul, and the tape I played for everyone was from Sproul's book, *The Holiness of God*. After we listened to it, I asked everyone this question: *How good, how righteous, how holy do we have to be in order to be accepted by God?* It was quiet, so I provided the answer – *we must be perfect. We must be perfectly righteous*.

And there was a man there who was a member of our church, one of the leaders in fact, who took offense at what I said. "No one is or can be

perfect. God understands that and He forgives and accepts us as we are." He hated the holiness of God, you see. He did not want a holy, holy, holy God. [At his funeral, which I did not officiate at, years later he was praised by all as one of the finest Christian men they had ever known. In fact, we ended up putting him out of our church for unrepentant adultery and he scoffed at us when we did so].

If a person refuses to acknowledge that God is perfect in holiness, such a person will serve a false god, a false christ, and will regard themselves as "just kind of dead in sin, just maybe even mostly depraved, but certainly not totally dead or totally unable. So right doctrine must always begin with right thinking about God, and only then will we think rightly about ourselves. *People who cling to a false idea of God will always hold themselves up and insist that they are not so bad off as TULIP says.*

So let's think some more about this matter of the holiness of God.

First of all, the Bible is very plain –

Isa 6:1-5 In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. (2) 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. (3) And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” (4) And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. (5) 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!”

The New Testament reiterates the very same scene as seen by the Apostle John-

Rev 4:8 And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!”

Every single time that a human being in Scripture is described as somehow coming into the presence of the Lord – even just into a reflection of Him, the response is one of utter devastation and I think we could even say, terror. Even a much more indirect revelation of God’s holiness results in this kind of thing:

Luk 5:8-9 But when Simon Peter saw

it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” (9) For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken,

People love to hold on to the lie that if they were to stand before the Lord they would somehow just have a chat with Him when in fact the reality is that they would come apart at the seams – *woe is me, for I am undone* – and they would be overwhelmed with a devastating sense of their un-holiness.

So the, just what is *the holiness of God*? What does this mean? That God is holy, holy, holy? Well, it means that God is *other*. *That He is high and lofty – transcendent is the word often used*. When the Bible says that God is holy, it means that He is pure, that He is perfectly righteous, that He is sinless – but it means far more. It means something like this:

Isa 55:8-9 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. (9) For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

What do you think of when you think of God? I believe it was J.I. Packer who said that the answer to that question is

the most important thing a person can consider. The truth is that in our present earthly state, even a real Christian is not going to be able to envision God in His holiness. But what we can do *is to reject all false thoughts about Him by applying the truth of Scripture to our thoughts.*

Let me read to you some explanations or definitions of the holiness of God. Here is one from Brakel who we have been hearing from in the Sunday School class:

“Holiness is the pure essence of the character of God. Consequently, it relates to the brightness of all His perfections [and thus is closely allied with His glory], for which reason He is called a ‘light, and in Him is no darkness at all’ (1 John 1:5). The Lord continually reveals Himself as holy, in order that the heart of man may continually be filled with deep awe and reverence:

Exo 15:11 “Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?

1Sa 2:2 “There is none holy like the LORD: for there is none besides you; there is no rock like our God.

Psa 97:12 Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name!

Psa 105:3 Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice!

The Lord is not merely called holy, *but is holiness itself.*

From the holy character of God proceeds the holiness of all His deeds.

Deu 32:4 “The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.

And from His holy character [mark this down carefully] proceeds His hatred and contempt for sin:

Hab 1:13 You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?

Psa 5:4-5 For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you. (5) The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers.

And He delights in righteousness.

And this is from Louis Berkhof (Systematic Theology) –

“The Scriptural idea of the holiness of God is twofold. In its original sense it denotes that He is absolutely distinct from all His creatures, and is exalted above them in infinite majesty. It is sometimes spoken of as His central and supreme perfection. The holiness of God is something that is co-extensive with and applicable to, everything that can be said about God. He is holy in everything that reveals Him, in His goodness and grace as well as in His justice and wrath. This may be called the ‘majestic holiness’ of God.

The majestic holiness of God cannot be thought of conceptually and it includes such ideas as ‘absolute unapproachability,’ and ‘absolute overpoweringness’ or ‘aweful majesty.’ It awakens in man a sense of absolute nothingness, a ‘creature-consciousness’ or ‘creature-feeling’ leading to absolute self abasement.”

Berkhof really pins it down for us here. What he is describing is what Isaiah experienced. Listen again:

Isa 6:5 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!”

Do you see then how a proper (though we cannot express it perfectly) understanding of the holiness of God necessarily results in the sinner rightly understanding himself:

Luk 18:9-14 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: (10) “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. (11) The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. (12) I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ (13) But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ (14) I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Isaiah and this tax collector both understood what their condition was in contrast to the Holy One.

If we are ever to be put right with God – if we are ever to be in His presence – *then we must be holy as He is holy.* Sinless. Pure. And yet, man is totally depraved, total fallen, totally unable to even desire God. The Israelites deceived themselves when Joshua warned them:

Jos 24:19-21 But Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. (20) If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good.” (21) And the people said to Joshua, “No, but we will serve the LORD.”

How can unholy people be made holy? The holy, holy, holy God cannot look upon or excuse sin. The false god of so many professing Christians today – this idol of their own creation – excuses sin. But not the living and true God:

Psa 24:3-4 Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? (4) He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully.

Lev 19:1-2 And the LORD spoke to

Moses, saying, (2) “Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.

1Pe 1:15-16 but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, (16) since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

You see then why TULIP begins with the “T.” Because until we see and confess that we are *totally, radically fallen in sin, dead in trespasses, absolutely unable to make or even desire to make ourselves holy before the Holy, Holy, Holy God*, we will have no use for Christ. We will not be humbled. We will boast about our supposed goodness. And we will create and worship a false god, an image of our own fancy.

There is only ONE way to be holy, and that is to be made holy. *We must be born again.* So that the perfect holiness and righteousness of Christ becomes ours as we are joined to Him:

Rom 3:21-27 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— (22) the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: (23)

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (24) and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, (25) whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. (26) It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (27) Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith.

among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Without holiness, no one will ever see the Lord.

Are you holy? And if you believe you are, *why do you say that you are holy?* Think very, very carefully and honestly. Is your professed holiness of your own making, or is it the work of Christ? Was there ever – ever – a time when you were overwhelmed with your *unholiness* and dwarfed by the holiness of God? Perhaps, like many in churches today, you really think that God has always looked upon you with favor? Well, He has not!

Eph 2:1-3 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins (2) in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— (3)