

## “Holiness, Sinfulness, and a Cross in Between” – Isaiah 6:1-7

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*[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, [www.welovethegospel.com](http://www.welovethegospel.com).]*

Take your Bible and let's meet in Isaiah 6 (which you can find on page \_\_\_ in the Bible in the pew in front of you)...

While you're turning there, let me begin by wishing many of you a happy Mother's Day. We have some new mothers this year (even this week), some veteran soon to be mothers (by birth or adoption), some mothers who we get to love on and spoil for a day, and at least one mom who will have a special place in heaven because she had to raise young Brandon. Bless her heart. And then there is the mom who raises my children. Perhaps the only thing harder than raising young Brandon is raising three of young Brandon's kids. Just saying. Of course, we also celebrate the mothers who are no longer with us. Understandably this day comes with mixed emotions. You'll notice in the front we have a beautiful arrangement of flowers that was donated this year in honor of the mothers who are no longer with us. Beside it is a dedication that reads, "In honor of our mothers who are not in our presence, but are in the presence of the Lord." We love you all. We appreciate you all. And as you leave today, some of the children will give the mothers a flower that is but a dim reflection of how beautiful each of you are to us and our homes.

We have been looking at the nature of biblical humility the last several weeks—what it is and what it isn't. Last week we looked at how Christian humility has less to do with modern ideas about self-esteem and more to do with biblical ideas of identity. The way we see our self is shaped by the work of Christ and our union to Christ through faith. For this reason, the Christian life and Christian humility is characteristically joyful. There may be mourning along the way, but, as Jesus said, "*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted*" (Matthew 5:4).

Today I want to push that thought about Christian identity a bit further (a little excursus) and help us to see the centrality of the Gospel for a right understanding of who we are and how we live. There are so many passages we could look at to that end, but today we will look at the words of the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah 6 is a passage that is familiar to many of you, I suspect. There are a couple verses within this chapter that get thrown around a lot. Even those who have never read this chapter will likely find verse 4 to sound familiar—"*Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.*" Those of you who grew up in church have heard verse 8 thrown around quite a bit when conversations have turned to a call to missions. The question—"*Whom shall I send?*"—has been met with many a missionary crying out, "*Here I am! Send me.*" These verses are inspiring. They're memorable. We put them on t-shirts and inside expensive frames.

Yet while there are aspects of this chapter that ring familiar, few of us have probably really studied them in their original context. That context is vast and too vast, in fact, for us to do justice to in one sermon. But we can hit some of the highlights in our time this morning as we seek to understand our Christian experience a little better.

Isaiah was a prophet and this passage is sometimes thought of as describing the call of Isaiah into ministry, but that's not really accurate. Isaiah was a prophet before all of this, with a significant and recognized ministry in Israel prior to the events of Isaiah 6. But there is certainly a special task that Isaiah is

commissioned for in this scene. Before we get to that, let's look at the context of chapter 5.<sup>1</sup> In chapter 5, the prophet is pronouncing judgment on the people of Israel. He likens them to a well cared for vine that has failed to bear any fruit. This is how Isaiah sees Israel. They are a people who have failed to produce spiritual fruit. So the prophet has a message of "woe."

Six times Isaiah says "woe" to them in this chapter. They have accumulated wealth unjustly, so Isaiah says, in verse 5, "*Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field...*" They have given themselves over to drunkenness, so Isaiah writes, in verse 11, "*Woe to those who rise early in the morning, that they may run after strong drink, who tarry late into the evening as wine inflames them!*" They were dishonest, so Isaiah writes, in verse 18, "*Woe to those who draw iniquity with cords of falsehood...*" They were moral relativists, so we read, in verse 20, "*Woe to those who call evil good and good evil...*" They were marked by arrogance, so the prophet says, in the next verse, "*Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight!*" And social injustice was the norm, so Isaiah announces a sixth "woe" in verses 22 and 23: "*Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink, who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of his right!*"

Reflecting on this Phil Ryken writes,

"As we review Isaiah's lamentable list of woes, we may well wonder what the prophet would say to us. Maybe we would prefer not to know, because most of us do not particularly enjoy having our sins exposed. But in all likelihood, Isaiah would say some of the same things to us that he said to ancient Israel. Woe to us for using our wealth to multiply selfish privilege, for abusing alcohol and other pleasures, for bending the truth to improve our image, or for shrinking the ethical teaching of Scripture to make it fit neater with our sinful desires. And woe to us for thinking that Isaiah 5 is mainly for someone else—someone we hope will finally listen—rather than realizing that God is speaking to us. We should not be 'wise in our own eyes,' as Isaiah describes it, but admit that we, too, do not have it all together spiritually yet."<sup>2</sup>

He's right. We don't. So we do well to imagine ourselves in the shoes of the original audience that Isaiah was writing to in an effort to heed Isaiah's call to repentance. And if we had been Jews in that day, having just heard the six woes of chapter 5, we would have a sense that we are not done yet. Why? Because seven is a significant number in Jewish thinking. The number of completion. So we have six woes, but we're left asking, "what about the seventh?" We're not done yet.

As it turns out there is a seventh woe that drops. And it comes in chapter 6, verse 5. Look there. Isaiah says,

*"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!'"* (Isaiah 6:5)

So think about how all of this holds together. In chapter 5, Isaiah went around saying, "Woe are you guys over here...and you guys over there...and woe to you people..." But he's not done yet until the prophet sees the sin in his own heart. He can't go around pronouncing judgment on the people and ignore the brokenness of his own soul. We are in this together, people and prophet, parishioners and pastors. We are all big sinners in need of grace and mercy.

But let's not move over Isaiah's confession too quickly. Notice the area of Isaiah's life that he puts forth as "exhibit A" of his brokenness. He says, "*I am a man of unclean lips...*" His mouth. His speech. That's incredible and *unexpected*. If you had asked an Israelite to name a person they could count on to speak the truth, they would have pointed to the prophet. If we had asked Isaiah to name the area that he considered most surrendered to God, he would have pointed to his mouth. He was a prophet. He was a spokesman for God! Yet here, in this scene, we see him confessing that he was a "foul-mouthed sinner." As Ryken notes,

he had failed in that “one area of life that he had most completely surrendered to God.”<sup>3</sup> And upon seeing this he cries out, “*Woe is me!*” He has realized that he too was a failure like the people, even in the one area that he put forth the most effort to remain committed. So he comes clean.

But what was it that helped him to see his sinfulness? What was it that brought this prophet of God to his knees in anguish? The answer is—the holiness of God. Have a look at what Isaiah was seeing before he made his confession. Follow along as I read the beginning of chapter 6...

*“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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!’ <sup>4</sup> And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup> 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!’”* (Isaiah 6:1-5)

This is an amazing scene. Isaiah has this vision of Almighty God seated on a throne. In John 12:41, after quoting from Isaiah 6, we are told that Isaiah “*saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him*” (NIV). On the basis of that text, many scholars have argued that Isaiah was describing the pre-incarnate Son of God on His throne. Isaiah was seeing the awesomeness of God in the person of His Son. And everything that surrounds Him is breathtaking, from the train of His robe, to the sound of the voice, to the quake and smoke that it produces. No wonder the seraphim (which in Hebrew means “burning ones”) were flying with two of their six flaming wings and worshipping the Lord.

And what are they calling to one another? “*Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!*” Ancient Hebrew didn’t have punctuation. There were no exclamation points. If you want to emphasize something you repeat it. And here the word “*holy*” is repeated three times for good measure. They were celebrating God’s absolute holiness. But not just then. Even now! Right now before the Lord this same thing is happening. In the final book of the Bible, John writes,

*“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!’”* (Revelation 4:8)

Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? These creatures have been worshipping in this way since the day they were created. It is their employment. Their job is to give voice to God’s infinite holiness. They were doing it in Isaiah’s day. They were doing it in John’s day. They are doing it at this very moment.<sup>4</sup>

It’s amazing to think on and imagine. But the more we do, the more we find that the brightness of God’s holiness brings to light the woeful filth of our sinfulness. God’s holiness exposes our sinfulness. That was the prophet’s experience. That’s every Christian’s experience in fact. Here again, Ryken has some helpful remarks:

“It is wise for each of us to consider whether we have come to a similar place in our lives, making a complete confession and admitting without reservation that we are sinners in the sight of God. Isaiah’s trouble was not just this sin or that sin; it was his very identity as a sinner. He would never be holy enough for God. Anyone who catches even one glimpse of God’s true holiness knows immediately that he or she is in deadly peril. So let me ask: Have you ever been where Isaiah was when he found himself woefully lost? Have you seen enough of the holiness of God to know that you are a guilty sinner? It’s not just the bad things we did that we still feel guilty about; the bad

things we do that we can't stop doing; or all the good things we should do but don't. No, it's the trouble we're in as the sinners we are."<sup>5</sup>

He goes on to describe the proper response to such guilt when we recognize it. We see in this text our part and God's part. Let's start with our part. Our part is to admit our brokenness. Stop pretending. Just admit that you are a mess and a sinner in need of a Savior. The gap between your sinful condition and God's perfect holiness is larger than you can conceive. And, again, Isaiah's example is instructive. The area of his life that he could have prided himself as most righteous, most dedicated in, is the area, the case in point, he confesses as evidence of his sinfulness. *"I am a man of unclean lips."* In saying this he is admitting that he is in trouble everywhere. There is no area of his life untouched by sin. So he confesses this before the holy God.

All he can do is acknowledge his guilt. Fortunately for Isaiah, God can do more than declare the prophet guilty. God can do something about the guilt. Look at verse 6...

*"Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. <sup>7</sup> And he touched my mouth and said: 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.'"* (Isaiah 6:6-7)

Imagine how those last words felt to Isaiah—"your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." Isaiah sees his sin, senses his guilt, and repents. God forgives his sin and removes his guilt. It reminds me of a verse in the New Testament that says, *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:9)

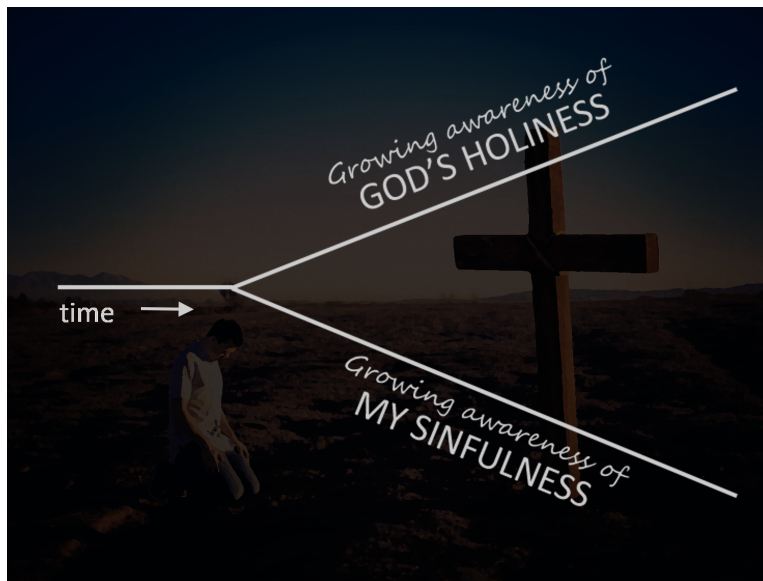
But in addition to this, we are reminded in these verses that blood must be shed for the forgiveness of sins. Where did the coal that touched Isaiah's lip come from? The altar. The altar was where sacrifices for sin were made. An animal was sacrificed, the blood was spilt on the on the altar, falling on the coals. Therefore, in this act of taking a burning coal and touching Isaiah's lips there is an object lesson, a reminder—"a lamb was slain, blood was spilt, a judgment fire was lit, and then, as a result, Isaiah's troubles were over."<sup>6</sup> This was what Isaiah was being reminded of and all of this foreshadows the ultimate sacrifice that forgives our sin and removes our guilt fully and finally—the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. As one writer explains,

*"...all of this grace is available to us in Jesus Christ. When we are in trouble because we are guilty (not if, but when), there is a way for us to be saved. The moment we confess our sins, God flies to us with his forgiveness. The Holy Spirit takes the atonement that Jesus accomplished and applies it directly to our sin. Pride, jealousy, lust, greed, theft, dishonesty, prejudice—Jesus dealt with all of our troubling sins on the cross. Because of the cross, we no longer need to say, 'Woe is me!' Instead, we can say, 'Thank you, Jesus.' Then and only then will we be ready to say what Isaiah said next: 'Here I am! Send me.'"*<sup>7</sup>

So what we are seeing in Isaiah is the Gospel acted out before the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are being prepared for the work of Christ and its impact on sinners. It's pointing us to the Savior, Jesus Christ, inviting us to see His holiness, our sinfulness, confess our guilt and need, and receive His saving intervention through faith in Christ, as a free gift of grace. When we do, the "woe" gives way to "thanks." We are made new, brought into right relationship with God and sent out in His service. It's the beautiful pattern and trajectory of the Gospel.

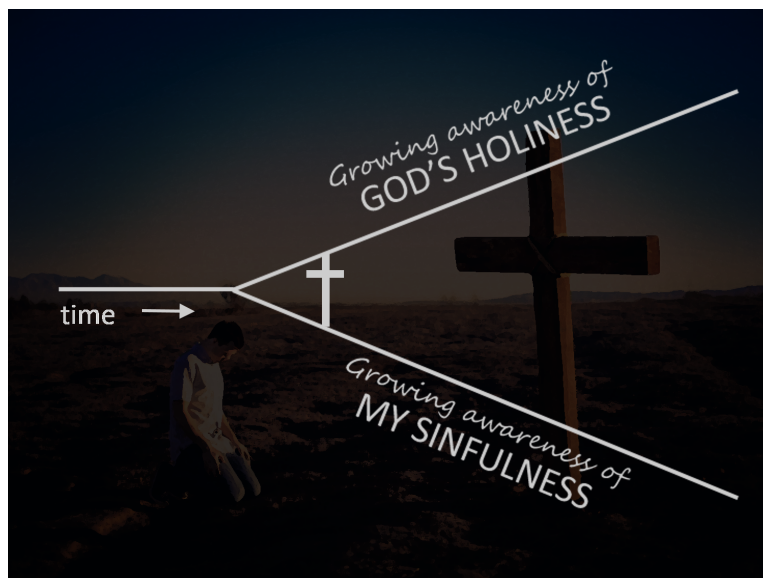
Let me show you a visual that I think will help us understand this. The next few images are adaptations from a couple charts developed by Robert Thune and Will Walker, from their Gospel-Centered curriculum series.<sup>8</sup> Take a look at the first image...



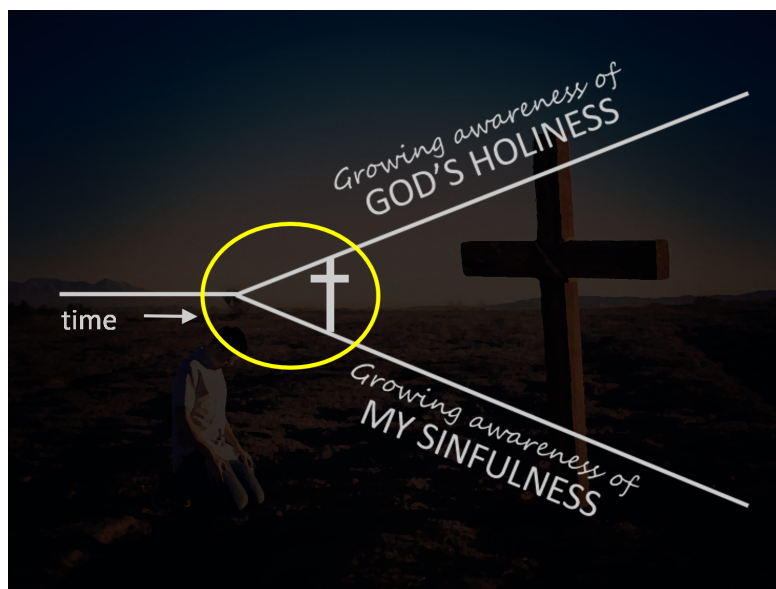


As Christians, there comes a point where we encounter the fact of God's holiness and, in the face of it, we sense our own depravity. That upward line represents our understanding of God's holiness, which increases over time. The downward line represents our awareness of our sinfulness, which also increases over time. Don't misunderstand. I'm not suggesting that God's holiness increases over time, but that our *awareness* and *understanding* of His holiness increases overtime in the Christian experience. I'm also not suggesting that our sinfulness increases in the sense of the frequency of our acts of sin. That actually decreases as we mature in our faith. But our awareness of sin in our life does increase as we mature. People who know us may say we are sinning less, but we are noticing that the root of sin in our life is deeper than we realized at our conversion. Sin has burrowed into crevices we didn't know we had. Areas of our life we didn't suspect or detect sin, we discover have not gone unaffected. This is why, for example, the Apostle Paul can say that he is the worst of sinners (e.g., 1 Timothy 1:15). He was sinning less, but as time elapsed he had seen more and more of his sin than he did previous days.

So you have an awareness of God's holiness and an awareness of your sinfulness with a huge gap in between. If that was the end of the story, this would be really bad news. But fortunately for us, God so loved the world that there is a cross to bridge the gap, the cross of Christ.



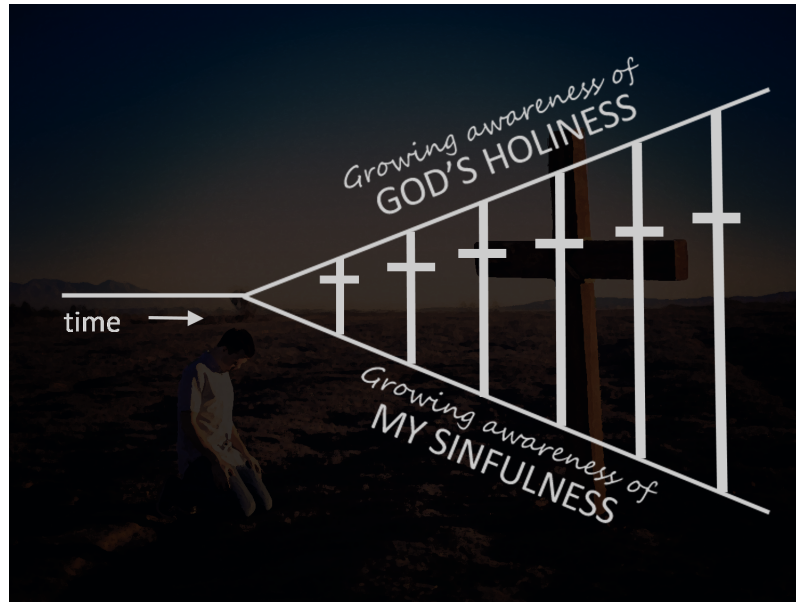
The cross is what keeps God’s holiness and our sinfulness from being bad news for us. Our sinfulness is forgiven because of the cross of Christ and the fact that it is empty because Christ lives again. Christ becomes the hero of our story and the cross becomes our anchor at the center. Christ died as our substitute, taking upon Himself our sin and bearing the wrath of God that issues from God’s holiness. He was condemned for sinners so that sinners wouldn’t have to be. He rose from the dead victorious over sin, death, and hell. His work is the basis of salvation (not our works). If we trust in Christ to save us (i.e., faith) by admitting our sin and our need for a Savior and resting entirely in Christ alone for our acceptance before God, then God forgives and adopts us as His own. Sin’s condemnation is removed and the chains of sin’s bondage are broken. That’s how salvation works. We don’t work for it. Christ did the work. We receive it by faith. As Thune and Walker put it, “Faith is...like getting under the surgeon’s knife. It’s a restful, whole-hearted commitment of the self to Jesus (Psalm 31:14-15). This is what it means to believe the gospel.”<sup>9</sup> It is the greatest news ever! If you’re a Christian, it’s your story. If you are not, it can be today if you would see God’s holiness, see your sinfulness and need, turn from the false hope of sin, and trust instead in the Savior Jesus Christ. That’s what Christian conversion looks like. If we were going to plot that point on the diagram, it would be right here...



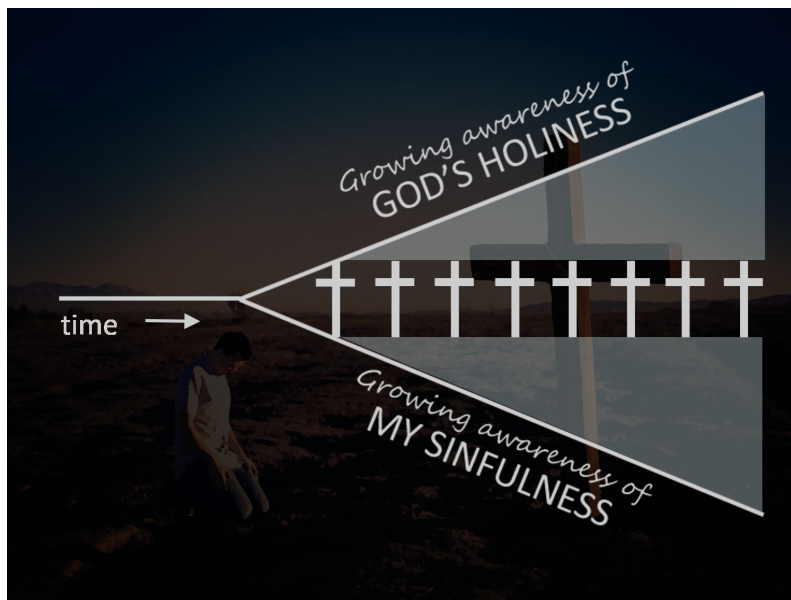
At our conversion there is some sense of God’s holiness, some sense of our sinfulness, and some sense that the work of Christ satisfies God’s holiness and deals with our sinfulness. From the moment we trust in Christ, that cross bridges the gap between us and God. It allows us to see both the holiness of God and our own sinfulness and yet experience joy. Why? Because we have a Savior! So we can experience joy in life, even in the storms of life, because our greatest needs have been met. Our future is secure. Nothing can separate us from God’s love. What good news! As Christians this good news defines us. It’s central to our life, our worldview, and our self-image. It’s central to our church, which is why Gospel-Centrality is one of our core values. It is our only boast. As Paul said to the Galatians, “*May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world*” (Galatians 6:14; NIV).

But our story doesn’t end at conversion. At that point, God sets in motion what the Bible calls sanctification. This is basically the process by which we become more and more like Jesus. When we become Christians it’s as though we are reborn and so, just like in our physical life, there is a process of growing up. All Christians are in process. That maturation relates to what we have been discussing today, because with it comes a growing understanding of God’s holiness and a growing awareness of the depths of our sinfulness. But remember the cross bridges the gap. So even though our awareness of both God’s holiness and our sinfulness seems to get bigger and bigger (not in reality, but in our understanding), and, therefore, the gap

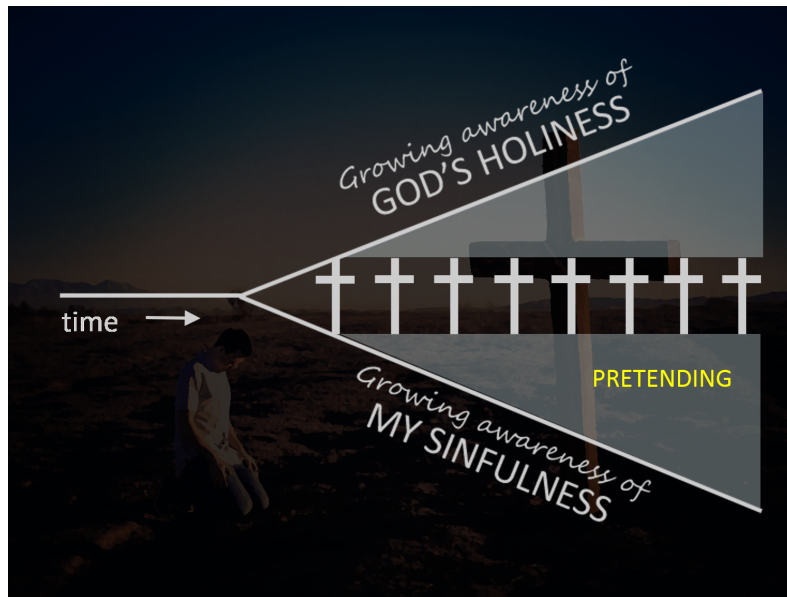
between the two gets more and more vast, nonetheless our rejoicing and appreciation of the work of Christ also gets bigger and bigger.



So as we mature, we don't graduate from the Gospel and move on the bigger things. No way. We are always fixated on Christ and His Gospel and it becomes a bigger and bigger part of our everyday lives. That's Christian maturity. That's the Christian experience. At least, that's what it should look like. In reality, and this is true for all of us (even Apostles; cf. Galatians 2:11-14), we deviate from this from time to time. We "shrink the cross" so to speak. In other words, we forget to reflect on these Gospel realities and in time "something is lacking in our understanding, appreciation, or application of Jesus's sacrifice for sin."



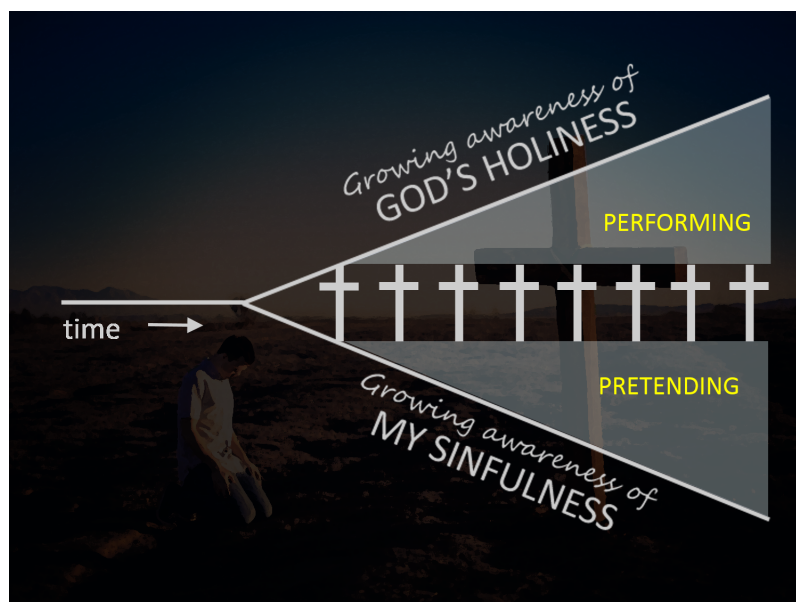
We do this in a couple of ways. One way is that we start pretending...



We minimize sin and start pretending that we are something that we are not. We defend ourselves, learn to fake it, hide or downplay our true nature, or play the games of exaggeration and blame.<sup>10</sup> Think about Adam and Eve, the first humans. When they first sinned against God, the Bible says their “eyes...were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sowed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths” (Genesis 3:7). What is that? That’s shame. They felt exposed, which is what shame is, the feeling of exposure. When we feel exposed, we feel like we don’t belong and we run for cover. That’s what sin leads to. We feel ashamed and we constantly try to cover our shame so that people won’t notice. But that doesn’t really deal with shame (as we saw last Sunday), that’s just shame dealing with us.<sup>11</sup> That’s pretending.

But, as Christians, that’s also shrinking the cross. That’s forgetting the significance of the work of Christ. God knows everything about us and He still loves us in Christ. His Son came to redeem the real us. And He loves us, the real us, not just some future version of us. There’s no need to pretend. We can go as far as Paul and admit that we are the worst sinner in the room and let that be the prelude for our boast in Christ and Him crucified. You see? The Gospel frees us from the need to pretend. We don’t have to pretend anymore. We can rejoice in God’s grace and mercy.

The other way we shrink the cross is by performing...

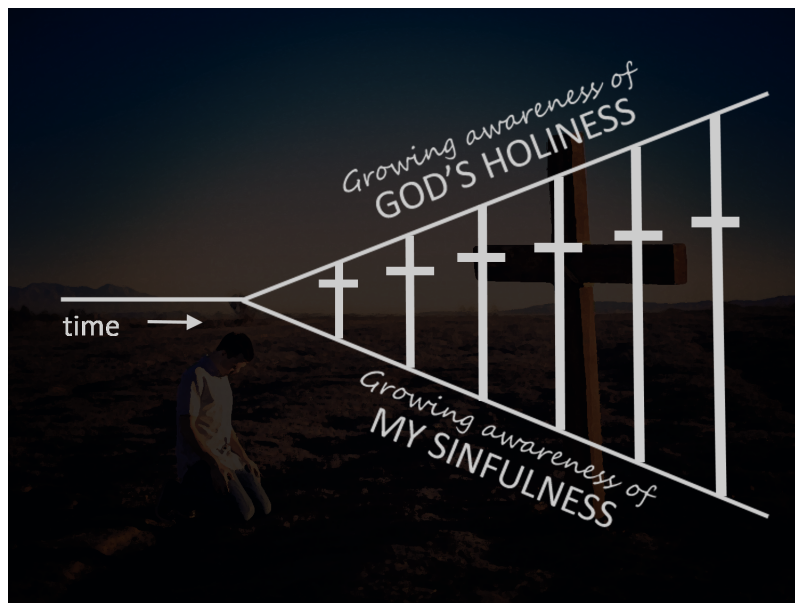




If you boil it down, our performance is an attempt to minimize God's holiness. Why? Because we are "reducing [God's] standard to something we can meet," and we live as though we are trying to measure up by "meriting his favor."<sup>12</sup> But, friends, if we think we can impress God with our living it can only be because we have minimized the standard of His holiness.

Once again, this is an inadequate view of our identity in Christ and the truth of the Gospel. The Christian life is not meant to be a performance. It's meant to be like a record playing the tune of repentance and believing the Gospel, repentance and believing the Gospel, repentance and believing the Gospel... And it's a beautiful song in the end, that doesn't require us to ignore God's holiness or our sin, but only boast in the cross of Christ. And the more we sing it (and sing it together) the more amazing the grace of that cross looks to us. And the holiness of God doesn't lead us to perform any more, but leads us to rest in the perfect performance and track record of Christ, which is credited to our account through faith. We can rejoice because our standing with God is based on Christ's performance, not our own.

So we don't have to perform or pretend. We can celebrate the Gospel instead. We don't have to shrink the cross. We can magnify the cross instead. We don't have to boast in ourselves, because, as one writer put it, "the good news of the gospel is not that God makes much of us, but that God frees us to make much of Jesus." We don't have to put on a show. We can be real. We can confess, repent, and believe the Gospel. Confess, repent, and believe the Gospel. And we will find much joy in this. The Gospel will take deeper root in our lives. And Jesus and His cross will become a bigger and bigger part of our day-to-day reality.<sup>13</sup> We can stop shrinking the cross, drifting from the truth of the Gospel, and get back to this instead.



No more performing. No more pretending. Way more glorifying Christ!

That's all the time we have for this sermon. We will pick up next week and possibly wrap up this sermon series. Try to be here and bring a friend. We have some important stuff to explore together....

Let's pray...

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<sup>1</sup> Much of what I will say in this sermon that follows, regarding Isaiah 5 and 6, is derived from, shaped by, and stated better by

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> The chart shows up in a couple volumes from this series, but the citations have been drawn from the volume I have most recently been reading through, which is *The Gospel-Centered Life for Teens: Leader's Guide* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2014). They actually have a couple of variations of one chart and we have made a few modifications to fit the flow of the sermon without violating the point or intention of the original source. Much of what follows by way of explanation of these charts is also communicated in this source.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 31-32.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 42.