

# Unworthy, but Not Worthless

by David Wong

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*The sermon emphasizes that while we may feel unworthy in God's presence, we are still called to serve and surrender to His will.*

**Duration:** 44:53

**Scripture:** Isaiah 6:1-8, Matthew 13:13-15, Mark 4:10-12, Luke 8:9-10, John 12:37-41, Acts 28:25-27, Romans 11:7-10

**Topics:** "Unworthy"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher tells a story about two men caught in a snowstorm in the Himalayas. One of them is an evangelist and the other is his friend. They are trying to reach a village before nightfall to avoid freezing to death. Along the way, they encounter a man who has fallen and is injured. The evangelist stops to help him, while his friend continues on. The sermon raises the question of why we serve and emphasizes the importance of having a heart to serve others. The preacher also mentions the church's priorities of hunger for God's word, a heart to serve, and a burden for the lost.

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## Transcript

Isaiah chapter 6 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and His throne filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims, each one had six wings, with twin he covered his face, and with twin he covered his feet, and with twin he did fly. And one cried unto another and said, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.

And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke. Then said I, Woe is me, for I am undone, because 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.

Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar. And he laid it upon my mouth and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips, and thy iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. Also I heard the voice of the Lord saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I, send me.

And he said, Go, and tell these people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not, and see it indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of these people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes, lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert and be healed. Then said I, Lord, how long? And he answered, Until the cities be wasted without inhabitants, and the

houses without men, and the land be utterly desolate.

And the Lord hath removed men far away, and there be a great forsaking in the midst of the land. But yet in it shall be a tent, and it shall return and shall be eaten, as a teal tree, and as an oak, whose substance is in them when they cast their leaves, so the holy seed shall be the substance thereof. Pastor David.

Very good morning. Today is Dedication Sunday. Every year, in January, as we begin the new year, we dedicate ourselves for God's service.

In fact, every Sunday, at the end of the worship service, we flash a slide that says, service is over, your service begins. So we are reminded each year, each Sunday, that we are called to serve. Recently as a nation, we have also been reminded of our service, in particular our service to the nation.

In the current debate on the salaries of our leaders in political office, the question is again raised. Why do we serve? Is it for monetary reward? Should financial reward be the main factor for attracting the best talent to serve in the political and public office? Well, as a church, we raised this issue two years ago. Some of you may remember that as we started 2010, and not 2011, as mentioned in the bulletin, as we started 2010, I spoke on our three priorities.

And the three priorities, if you remember, are the first, a hunger for God's word, the second, a heart to serve, and the third, a burden for the lost. And over the last two years, by God's grace, we have tried to incorporate these priorities into all our ministries. We have tried, for example, to whet our appetite for God's word by linking the pulpit ministry with the Bible study in our action groups.

We have encouraged our ministries to reach out to the unchurched and the unsaved. Last December provides a good example of a series of outreach events, reaching out to the young and old, to our loved ones and friends who still do not know the Lord. Today we want to revisit the second priority, a heart to serve.

Well, thank the Lord for all those who have already stepped forward to serve this year. As I look at the list of names in the dedication list, eight pages of names in very small print. There must be hundreds of names of people who have already stepped forward to serve for the year 2012.

They represent a good percentage of our Sunday congregations, and for this we praise God. But there is also a significant percentage of those who are not serving. Perhaps they are taking a break after years of service.

That's fine. We hope that they will be back to serve with us after a well-deserved break. Some are serving not in the church, but elsewhere, like in organizations like the BSF, the Bible Study Fellowship.

Others are serving as salt and light of the world through their professions in their workplaces, and some perhaps at home, taking care of elderly parents. So service for God is not limited to the local church. Even though I feel that just as charity begins at home, service for God should begin in a place we call our spiritual home.

Afterwards we're going to be standing together to make the dedication pledge, and as we prepare for that, I would like us to consider together the question, why do we serve? Why do we serve? But before we look at the passage we have for today, let us just bow for a word of prayer. Let us pray. Our God and our Heavenly Father, as the year begins, and as we ask ourselves, do we have a heart to serve? Why do we

serve? Lord, may you speak to us through your word this morning.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. I want to begin with the story of two men caught in a snowstorm.

One was an evangelist, and the other his friend. They were traveling in the mountains of the Himalayas when they were caught in a snowstorm. The snow was falling, the winds were howling, and it was getting bitterly cold.

The friend said, we must hurry. We must get to the village before the night falls. They hurried along the mountain path.

The sun was setting, it was getting colder and colder. When they heard someone crying for help, they looked down from the mountain path and saw that a man had fallen off the edge and lying wounded on the ledge below. The evangelist said, we must stop and help.

His friend said, no, it is his fate. If we stop now, we will all die. He hurried along.

The evangelist stopped and climbed down the slope. The wounded man was badly hurt and could not walk. With great effort, the evangelist lifted the man onto his shoulders, carried him, and climbed back up on the mountain path.

Would the evangelist with the wounded man on his back make it back to the village alive? Would his friend make it back to the village alive? Now, some of you know the ending of this true story. But those of you who do not, you may have to wait. You will have to wait until the end of my sermon to find out.

Now, this story raises a question. When we serve, when we help, do we give or do we receive? When we serve others, when we help others, do we give ourselves to them or do we also receive something in return? Ask you to hold that question in mind as we turn to our passage for today, Isaiah 6. Here we will see the prophet called to service. How did he respond? How did God react to his response? And what does it mean to serve God by serving people? In Isaiah 6, the prophet saw a vision.

Or more correctly, he experienced a vision. You see, the experience was not only one of sight. It was also of hearing, of feeling, of smelling, and of tasting.

He saw the seraphim, saw the angels. He heard them calling to one another. He felt the doorpost shake.

He smelled the smoke that filled the temple. And he tasted a life cold brought to his mouth. All the five senses of the human body are involved.

You know, God made us with our senses. And often he deals with us by engaging our senses. Isaiah needed this experience because he was living at a crucial time in the history of the nation.

The vision came to Isaiah in the year that King Uzziah died, according to verse 1. King Uzziah has ruled the nation for more than 40 years. This means that an entire generation had known only one king, King Uzziah. In today's context, you may think of Colonel Gaddafi in Libya or Queen Elizabeth in Britain.

When Gaddafi was overthrown, it marked the end of an era. Likewise, should Queen Elizabeth pass away, it would mark the end of an epoch of history for the British people. Such was the occasion of Isaiah's encounter with God.

King Uzziah had been a good and capable king, at least for a large part of his reign. He fortified the walls of the capital city, Jerusalem. He organized and strengthened the army.

He captured the neighboring foreign lands, extended new frontiers, and secured the trade routes that ran between the north and the south in the region. He even developed irrigation systems in the desert and grew crops to feed his people. Unfortunately, in his old age, he became proud and arrogant over what he had done and sinned against God.

God inflicted him with leprosy and he died leper. He did not finish well. But his death after 40 years marked the end of an era.

It was natural for the people at the time to ask, what's going to happen now? What's going to happen next? It is in such a context that God appeared to the prophet Isaiah to reassure him. The earthly king may be dead and gone, but the heavenly king is still on the throne. So Isaiah saw the Lord seated on the throne high and lifted up.

So we sing in that little chorus, God is still on the throne and he will remember his own. Though trials may press us and burdens distress us, he never will leave us alone. Now what happens when we have an experience, an encounter with God? The first thing we see here in this passage is an admission of unworthiness.

Isaiah cried out, this is what he says, Woe is me, in verse 5, for I am undone because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for mine eyes have seen the king, the Lord of hosts. Now notice that Isaiah did not say, wow, he said, woe. What he saw was not something that impressed him so much that he said, fantastic or awesome or one of those words that we often use.

Now there is a tendency among us living in the television age to view things as spectators. Now we watch something on TV and we say, wow, but it does not affect us in any way. It does not change our lives in any way.

This is the danger of living in an age of entertainment, watching YouTube, reading posts from the Facebook and reading news clips off the Internet. We find them all entertaining, but they make little impact on our lives. If we truly have an encounter with God, the first thing that happens to us is a sense of unworthiness.

We sense the holiness of God and our own sinfulness. We sense the power of God and our own weakness. We sense the majesty of God and our own frailty.

A group of learned men was sitting around a room discussing history and different historical figures. One of them asked, I wonder what we would do if the people we are talking about walk into the room. Yes, someone said, what if Hitler walks into the room? Well, we would ignore him, one of them said.

What about Shakespeare? Well, I guess we all stand up in honor of him. One by one they suggested different names until someone said, what if Jesus stepped into the room? There was silence. For a while, no one knew what to say.

Finally, one of them said, I think I will fall down at his feet. You see, when Isaiah acknowledges his unworthiness, that's the right response. Not wow, but woe is me.

We are not worthy to sit or even to stand in his presence. We will fall down at his feet. When Isaiah acknowledges his unworthiness, God instructed one of the seraphs to fly with a live coal, taken from the altar with tongs, to Isaiah and touch his lips with it.

There must have been a burning sensation like when an animal is being branded with a red hot stamp. And God said to Isaiah in verse 7, Lo, this hath touched thy lips, and thy iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. It is interesting that a live coal is presented as a cleansing agent.

It reminds me of how heat is sometimes applied to burn away tissues that are diseased or infected. Now some of you know what a colonoscopy is. When a doctor performs a colonoscopy, he uses a miniature camera to check for unusual growth in the colon.

And when he sees a polyp that could develop in the tumor, he uses an instrument to either cut it off or burn it off. That way the colon is made clean and healthy. Thank the Lord that he does not leave us feeling unworthy.

He does something about it. He offers us cleansing, forgiveness, atonement. All this is possible because of what Jesus had done on the cross, taking our sins and dying in our place.

But that's not the end of an encounter with God. That's only the beginning. We are unworthy but we are not worthless.

God does not cast us aside because we are sinful. We are still of worth to God in his sight. And so we see not only an admission of unworthiness, we see an act of surrender.

After the admission of unworthiness comes the act of surrender. And this is the second utterance of Isaiah. Here I am, or here am I. Because the people in this nation are all sinful like Isaiah, God needed someone to go and tell them.

Isaiah was called to go and he responded in an act of surrender. Here I am. Today we often describe such an experience as an act of consecration, an act of commitment, as an act of obedience.

Now I do not think these words are wrong, but they tend to shift emphasis from something that God does to something that we do. But before we can do anything, we need to make ourselves first available to God. And that is surrender.

Surrender means saying, I give up. It's no longer about me. I hand myself over to you.

It's all yours. It's all about you now. Not what I want, but what you want.

In his book, *Mentoring Paradigms*, Pastor Edmund Chan of the Covenant Evangelical Free Church makes a point about the difference between Western Christianity and Asian Christianity. He was talking about a friend of his who was visiting from the West where the churches are not doing well. And then when he saw here in Asia how churches are growing and thriving, he made an observation.

He says in the West we always talk about commitment, what we do for God. But I see that here in the East you talk more about surrender, what God can do in us and through us. There's some truth in it, even though I personally believe we need both words.

We need both surrender and commitment, commitment and surrender. But surrender must always come first before commitment. Surrender must always come first before commitment.

Not what I want to do for God, but what does the Lord want me to do for him. Finally, we consider the third and the last utterance of Isaiah. In this passage, Isaiah said three things.

First of all, he says, woe is me, an admission of unworthiness. Then he says, here am I, an act of surrender. And when he says here am I, God said to him in verses 9 and 10, he says, go and tell these people, hear ye indeed but understand not, see ye indeed but perceive not.

Make the heart of these people fat and make their ears heavy and shut their eyes, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and convert and be healed. What a strange commission. It's an admission of failure, doomed from the start.

The Prophet is called to speak to people who will not listen. He's called to speak to them anyway because despite the fact that every time he speaks to them, their hearts will become hardened and more hardened to the point that they will hear and not understand, they will see and not perceive. We ask if such verses and teachings are found in the Bible.

Yes, they are. In fact, not only here in Isaiah, the Old Testament, but it's quoted, this passage is quoted five times in the New Testament by Jesus as well as by the Apostle Paul because they also spoke to people who just would not listen and respond. Well, for Isaiah, it was not a word of encouragement.

So he responds to the question, how long? Lord, how long? And this brings us to the last mark of an encounter with God. Firstly, there is an admission of unworthiness. Then there is an act of surrender.

Now there is an acceptance of mystery. We ask questions, but we may not get all the answers. Isaiah was commissioned to a task that seemed futile, which promised no success.

Naturally, he asked how long he had to do it. Notice that Isaiah did not ask why he had to do it. He did not say no to doing it.

He only wanted to know how long he had to do it. He accepted that he did not fully understand what God was asking him to do, but he embarked on it anyway, even though he knew he would face certain failure. He accepted the task.

He accepted the mystery behind the task. You see, when we have surrendered ourselves to the Lord, we do not ask questions. And if we do, we do not demand to know the answers.

And that is the final mark of an encounter with God, of our service for the Lord, the element of mystery. God does not tell us everything. He need not tell us everything.

For the simple reason that we do not and will never understand everything. If we do, then we would be God. So in life, as well as in our service for God, there are many things we do not understand and will not understand.

God does not promise us that everything will be fine when we serve Him. Sometimes, like Isaiah, we will serve God without seeing any tangible results from our service. No one seems to appreciate what we are doing, and nothing seems to be coming out of what we are doing.

Sometimes we will meet difficulties with people we are serving with. We will be disappointed. We will be hurt.

We wonder why we volunteered in the first place to serve. We could have spared all these bad experiences if we had not volunteered. At times when we serve God, we seem to be facing more problems than before.

And we wonder, did not God say that if we honour Him, He will honour us? If we serve Him, He will bless us? How is it that when we offer ourselves to His service, we face more problems than blessings? Over the last two months at our staff devotions, we have experienced some rather tearful and emotional moments. Every Thursday morning, all our staff, our admin staff, our pastoral staff, our ministry staff, we meet together for a time of worship, exaltation and prayer. Each staff takes turns to share.

About a month ago, one of our staff shared with us her two-year journey with breast cancer. It was when she decided to quit her teaching position and join our staff that she was diagnosed with cancer. The testimony of her struggle with doubt, with pain, brought tears to all of us.

And soon after that, another staff shared. He had also decided to leave a comfortable position to serve on our staff. His wife was diagnosed with breast cancer.

It was a rollercoaster experience for him and his family. He cried as he shared and we all cried with him. And last week, yet another staff shared at our devotions.

He has given himself to serve God for many years. And yet, there are things that he just could not understand. Instead of telling you what he shared, I'm going to invite him to do it himself.

He will share in Mandarin, and I'll try my best to interpret for him. So, Pastor Lim Chi Tai, could you please come forward and share with us what you shared at our Thirsty Devotion with our staff. I thank God and Pastor David for the opportunity to share with you my testimony, my life's journey.

I thank God for giving to me a wife, a virtuous wife, as my capable helpmate on my left hand. Before she married me, she wanted to know how she can be a better helper as a pastor's wife. At the age of 25, she took up piano lessons because she wanted to learn to play hymns.

She was always by my side, she criticized me, she was my critic when I preached, and she offered valuable comments and reminders in my ministry. Three years after we were married, she answered God's call to go to Bible college for a three-year theological course. In recent years, she was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease.

This disease has affected her muscles and movements, and the ability to coordinate her movements, especially her left hand, which is gradually becoming paralyzed. This has also affected her ability to play the piano, even doing simple housework. There were many questions in her mind with no answers.

Why does God allow such sickness to come to a servant of His? So she started to cut herself off from people, shut herself off, not willing for people to know her condition. Last year I invited the church staff to a Thanksgiving lunch, and my home is just across the road from the church, to thank God for helping me to complete my studies at Singapore Bible College during my sabbatical year. At the time, my wife was still able to use her hands, and she prepared a sumptuous 7-course lunch with desserts and fruits for all the staff, and I only helped a little bit.



And as Pastor Titai shared with us, it was only through his service for God that he came to know God in a way he would never know Him. Often the only way to know God is by knowing the cost and the pain and the sacrifice of serving Him. How else can we really experience the grace of God, the strength that He gives us, and the love He shows us? Let me conclude by going back to the story of the two men caught in the snowstorm.

Remember how they must get to the village before the night falls, or else they will freeze to death. One evangelist had stopped to help a man who had fallen and was injured. The other had not stopped but had gone ahead.

So who will make it to safety? The evangelist was struggling along in the cold with a wounded man on his shoulder. He finally saw the lights of the village in front of him, and just as that time he kicked against something and fell, he looked and it was the body of his friend who had fallen and frozen to death. Just a short distance from the village, the evangelist made it to the village.

And when he finally stopped and put down the wounded man, he realized to his astonishment that he was actually perspiring. He was actually perspiring. You see, in the effort to carry the man in the exertion and the friction between the two bodies, heat had been generated, and that heat had kept both he and the man alive.

This is a true story and was told by the great Indian Christian mystic Sadhu Sundar Singh. He was once asked the question, what is the most difficult thing in life? What is the most difficult thing in life? And to answer the question, he told this story, a true story. And the answer to the question is this.

The most difficult thing in life is to have no burden to carry. The most difficult thing in life is to have no burden to carry. You see, when we carry the burden of service, when we carry the weight of those who are wounded and who are needy, we not only are doing them a favor, we are actually doing ourselves a favor.

Through serving God brings with it hard work and sacrifice and pain and struggle. But in the end, as Sadhu Sundar Singh found out, the one we save may actually be the one who saves us. So you see, to serve is not only to give.

We receive so much in return. So as I come to the end, we ask the question, can we afford to serve? Very often we ask this question, can I afford the time? Do I have the energy? Can I afford to serve? Let me suggest that today we turn the question around and ask ourselves, can I afford not to serve? Can I afford not to serve? Let us pray. Our God and our Heavenly Father, we thank You for speaking to us this morning through Your Word, through the experience of Isaiah and also through the testimony of our brother Jittai and his wife Anne.

Father, we thank You for many opportunities to serve You in the Church, in our workplaces, at home. And we pray, Lord, that You will help us to give of ourselves, despite our unworthiness, in an act of surrender to serve You. And in our service, we thank You that You will give us experiences to help us to know You more, to understand Your grace and to experience Your love.

And even now, we commend into Your hands Pastor Jittai and his wife, as well as all those of our staff who face health issues. And all of us, as we serve You, we have our own challenges. And yet we know that sometimes it's through all these challenges that we actually come to know You much better, know You more deeply, know You more intimately.

So there's a whole purpose of our service for You, to know You, to know You as our Lord, to know You as our friend. Help us, we pray, in Jesus' name, Amen. Elder Sunny has asked me to lead in the response song.

It's because it's a song which my brother and I have written for a musical on John Soong in the year 1994. Here I am. I think it's an appropriate song for us to sing.

Some of you know this song. We have sung this once before, a long time. Let's all stand in response to what we have heard.

Here I am, with nothing in my hands, I come to You. With nothing henceforth, left henceforth, I call my own. Maybe we just play the melody first.

Let's start from the beginning. Here I am. Here I am.

With nothing in my hands, I come to You. Here I am. With nothing but this body.

And gave himself. We're now going to make the act of dedication by saying together the dedication pledge. But before that, I would like to invite our Pastor Emeritus, Pastor Craig, to come forward.

You remember in October when we made the announcement about Pastor Craig becoming Pastor Emeritus, our worship leader, Chong Yau, was very quick to call him Pastor Emeritus. And I reminded him that Pastor Craig is not called Pastor Emeritus until January 2012. So this morning, I'm pleased to introduce to you Pastor Craig as our Pastor Emeritus.

Well, as Pastor Emeritus, he has been very busy with ministry. In fact, in a few weeks' time, he's going to be traveling to Brazil to attend the International Council of Christian Churches conference as our representative. He continues to represent us to some of these external bodies.

Pastor Craig is also very involved in our foreign missions, still mentoring Hao Jin, who is our new missions director. Pastor Craig is also, as you see in the dedication list, a counselor chaplain at Bishan Home. I'd like to invite him to come and join me at the pulpit.

I'd like to take this opportunity to also mention that Dr. Philip Satterwhite, the principal of Biblical Graduate School of Theology and I, we are editing a book of essays in honor of Pastor Craig. You'll read about it in the bulletin. Please pray for us.

This book is in production, and we hope that it will be ready in a few months' time so that we can take this opportunity to honor Pastor Craig with the essays. Let us all stand now, and we're going to say the pledge together, after which I'll ask Pastor Craig to pray for us, to pray for all of us. All those who? Okay, they are saying all to stand.

Okay, I'm assuming all of you want to serve God. Okay. All right, all of us, whether we are serving God or desiring to serve God, we will stand and say this pledge together.

All right, let's say it together. I believe the Lord has saved me to serve him. As Jesus gave his life, I will give my best to him.

By my own strength, not by myself alone, but together with all my brothers and sisters, I dedicate myself to my Heavenly Father. Let us pray. Lord, we stand before you, both those of us who are serving and those

who have not yet made a commitment but may do so.

We come before you to thank you for all who serve in committees, particularly of session, the boards, the teams. There are many teams, each doing specific duties. We come before you, Lord, as members who are serving in seven services of Zion Bishan.

Many of us are in ministries, serving in home and foreign missions, and in administrative committees. We present to you our gifts and our failures. We present to you our joys and sorrows, our oneness and sometimes our disunity.

But we thank you, Lord, for your grace, your love and forgiveness. We thank you for the things that we have done well. We pray, Lord, that you will help us to do better for you in 2012.

May all glory and honor be unto you, O Lord. We thank and praise you in Christ's most blessed name. Amen.

Be seated, please.

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