

THE HOLINESS OF GOD

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Is. 6:1-11; Rev. 4 Luke 5

INTRO:

Do you know what the first song recorded in Scripture has to do with the final songs in Revelation? If you were composing scriptural songs, what would you choose to focus on? Not only the first song, but also the final song in Scripture exalts the holiness of God. In between Ex. 15 and Rev. 15:3-4, God's holiness is often described. "Holy is used more often as a prefix to God's name than any other attribute. And in the only two instances recorded in Scripture where men are permitted to see into the throne room of heaven and view God in the fullness of his glory, they hear angelic beings singing continuously, 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.'" (S5) Throughout all the angelic songs, no other divine attribute is cubed or repeated 3 times. We do not observe the angels singing, "Eternal, Eternal, Eternal" or "Merciful, Merciful, Merciful," or "All-knowing, all-knowing, all-knowing," but "Holy, Holy, Holy."

The Holiness of God is certainly central to his entire character; it may be as central as any other attribute of God. "Today we are inclined to emphasize the love of God, but we can never begin to appreciate his love as we should until we understand something of his holiness. A person's concept of God determines more than anything else what kind of life that person will live" (S5) "God is intrinsically holy. . . . All he does is holy; he cannot act but like himself; he can no more do an unrighteous action than the sun can turn dark. God is holy primarily and transcendently. He is the original and pattern of holiness. It began with him who is the Ancient of Days. God is perfectly, unalterably, and unchangeably holy." (Thomas Watson, p. 83)

"The sum of his moral excellency" is holiness (Pink, 41). "He is absolute Purity, unsullied even by the shadow of sin. . . . Holiness is the very excellency of the Divine nature. . . . As God's power is the opposite of the native weakness of the creature, as his wisdom is in complete contrast from the least defect of understanding or folly, so his holiness is the very antithesis of all moral blemish or defilement." (ibid). The Prophet Habakkuk said that God was of purer outlook than to behold evil.

In this sermon, I want to do a couple of things:

1. Review where the Scripture teaches the holiness of God;
2. Show you how Christians react toward this holiness
3. Discuss what difference this makes.

Here's a quote to begin with: "God's holiness and his nature are not two things, they are but one. God's holiness is his nature, and God's nature is his holiness. Holiness in angels and saints is but a quality, but in God it is his essence." (Thomas Brooks, S15) With over 600 instances of the word Holy, surely this is an attribute of God that is worthy of our closest attention.

A puritan (Charnock) said: Power is God's hand or arm, omniscience is his eye, mercy his bowels, eternity his duration, but holiness is his beauty." (S16)

Interestingly, there is no occurrence of the word "holy" in Genesis. As I've indicated, one of the first occurrences of the word "holy" is in Ex. 15:13: "In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling."

In Exodus 15, God is praised by Miriam as "Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is majestic in holiness, awesome in glory working wonders?" Earlier, Moses had been instructed to remove his sandals for the ground he walked on was so holy (Ex. 3). Think about that just a moment. According to many people today, it seems that the thing some religious engineers most try to effect is for people to feel comfortable with God. Many worship services, the very style of music and vocabulary about God has been transformed into language or trappings that at all cost must increase the comfort level. How contrary to what God did originally with Moses. Could some people today be worshipping another god?

In Moses' case, God did not usher him in, and try to make Moses comfortable. God told Moses in as dramatic a way as possible, that he could not even approach God like he was. **"Just as I am" in this case was not what God wanted.** God said, "Take your shoes off" or remove any symbols of moral contamination. In order to approach God, our filthiness must be disposed of.

The Sabbath is holy, the priesthood is holy; various offerings and ceremonies symbolize holiness or the removal of impurity.

Holiness is repeatedly symbolized in the construction of the Tabernacle and moving of the Ark of the Covenant. The Tabernacle is built at God's command and instruction; he willed to employ holy vessels, holy servants, and a holy plan. The result is a place that is filled with glory, an untouchable glory. God's presence in the Tabernacle and in the Ark of the Covenant is so powerful that even when it falls off its stand to touch it may bring immediate death. It is a holy, non-contaminated sanctuary. That tells us a lot about who God is.

Holy is used most frequently in the Book of Leviticus of all the canonical books. Time after time, nearly 100 in this one book, offerings, parts of the sanctuary, the altar, God's people are to be holy. Each time, they are to be removed from the filth of normal use. Dt. 7:6 declares that God's people are a holy people. Joshua, too, stood on holy ground (Josh. 5:15) as he met with the Angel of the Lord.

Hannah confessed that God was unique in his holiness (1 Sam. 2:2). The Psalter is filled with references to God's holiness:

- He makes Zion a holy hill (2:6; 3:4;)
- His temple is holy (5:7; 11:4)

- The Messiah is his holy One (16:10)
- God is enthroned as the holy one (22:3)
- Believers trust in his holy name (33:21)
- David does not want to be devoid of the holy spirit (51:11)
- God is the Holy One of Israel (71:22; 78:41; 89:18;
- God's arm is holy (98:1)
- His name is holy (99:3)

The Psalmist calls on us to gather all that is within us to bless his holy name (103:1). We are to glory in his holy name (105:3).

God is "holy in all his works." (145:17); thus his holiness touches every aspect of him. His justice is thoroughly holy, his wisdom is utterly holy, his power is a holy power, and his truth is always holy. His mercy is not extended apart from his holiness.

God is perfectly unpolluted by evil; "As there is no darkness in his understanding, so there is no spot in his will; as his mind is possessed with all truth, so there is no deviation in his will from it. He loves all truth and goodness; he hates all falsity and evil." (Charnock, 115)

"Holiness is the sparkling jewel in [God's] crown, the name by which he is known." (Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity*, 82) "His power makes him mighty, his holiness makes him glorious." Neither is holiness something that God can put aside. It is at the very core of who God is. From eternity God has been holy. While his mercy is extended to us long after creation, before creation God was inescapably holy.

The Prophet Isaiah used the word over 50 times, about once each chapter, in his book.

One of the classic passages in the OT to illustrate the holiness of God is Isaiah 6. Look at that with me.

The prophet gives us the setting. It is the year that a strong, dependable king dies and is taken from Israel. In this time of national crisis and political transition, Isaiah received a vision of the Lord. He saw God exalted, high and enthroned. This is a mighty Sovereign, whose regal train filled the temple. The surroundings tell us about his dignity.

Above the Throne were 2 seraphs, angelic creatures. Each of these had 6 wings. With those wings they covered their faces, their feet – or from head to toe, symbolizing totality—and with two other wings they flew. These spiritual beings did not approach God uncovered; their natural contamination had to be cloaked. No one can look on God's face and live.

They called out to one another: "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty." The repetition is significant. Normally when the Bible repeats something, it is important. For example, when Jesus says, "Truly, truly . . ." we learn to sit up and take note. He is serious, and intent on us hearing the message. Occasionally in Scripture a character's name will be repeated (Peter, Peter). The squaring or doubling of a name or a phrase indicates strong emphasis. But rarely is it taken to the third power. Here (and elsewhere) "Holy" is taken to the third level, like few other things ever are in the Bible. God is Thrice-Holy.

This fact led A. A. Hodge to remark: "The holiness of God is not to be conceived of as one attribute among others; it is, rather, a general term representing the conception of his consummate perfection and total glory. It is his infinite moral perfection crowning his infinite intelligence and power." (S 64)

After this, the temple shakes and creaks. And I want you to make sure that you see Isaiah's response to the presence of holiness. What does Isaiah do, when he realizes he is around Holiness? He doesn't whoop and holler; he doesn't dissolve into uncontrollable laughter, nor does he feel a jolt for his self-esteem. To the contrary, look at how he reacts and how he feels.

Isaiah says, "Woe is me. I am undone and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." He recognized his inability; he was crippled by the weight of God's glory, and even small things like speech were reflectors of our sinfulness.

He is undone, disintegrated.

Job, too, after God deals with him, showed the same response. He confessed that he had been wrong and did not understand. (Job. 42:1-6) When confronted with God's holiness, Job repented in dust and ashes.

"No attribute of God is more dreadful to sinners than his holiness." (S29). The closer we are to God, the clearer our sinfulness is. Ryle: "I am convinced that the first step toward attaining a higher standard of holiness is to first realize more fully the amazing sinfulness of sin." (S 29)

R. C. Sproul speaks of Isaiah's encounter with God as reflecting the normal trauma that occurs when a person meets the living God. God shocks our system. He traumatizes us with holiness. He is not like any other. He is wholly different. Calvin observed, "Hence that dread and amazement with which, as Scripture uniformly relates, holy men were struck and overwhelmed whenever they beheld the presence of God. . . . Men are never duly touched and impressed with a conviction of their insignificance until they have contrasted themselves with the majesty of God." (S31)

You see, we have grown quite accustomed to unholiness. So when we come into the presence of true holiness, like Isaiah, we are undone. We realize how truly sinful we are. And this God would never occur to the natural mind that so likes to flatter itself. Nowhere else in religion is this holiness, except by revelation. Sinful human beings would never concoct this notion.

Hodge: "Seraphs round about the throne who cry day and night, "Holy, holy, Holy is the Lord," give expression to the feelings of all unfallen rational creatures in view of the infinite purity of God. They are the representatives of the whole universe in offering this perpetual homage to the divine holiness." (S16)

But this episode is not over. God's grace is also apparent. Sproul notes: "The Holy God is also a God of grace. He refused to allow his servant to continue on his belly without comfort. He took immediate steps to cleanse the man and restore his soul. . . In this divine act of cleansing, Isaiah experienced a forgiveness that went beyond the purification of his lips. He was cleansed throughout, forgiven to the core, but not without the awful pain of repentance." (46-47, The Holiness of God)

God is "your redeemer, the Holy One of Israel" (Is. 41:14, 16, 20) "I am the Lord, your Holy One, Israel's Creator, your King." (43:15)

In the Gospels, most of the references to "holy" refer to the Holy Spirit. Jesus is "the Holy One of God." (Mk. 1:24) Mary in Lk 1:49, 72 speaks of God's holiness.

Still there is Mt. 7:6 where Jesus tells us not to give to dogs what is holy.

(NT Example: Peter in Luke 5)

Peter does the same thing Isaiah did earlier, when he is confronted with the holiness of Jesus. One day Peter and his co-workers are returning from a night of fishing. They have been very unsuccessful. Jesus, whom Peter had only recently met, instructs the professional fisherman to put out into the deep and there he'll catch some fish.

Peter reacts about like a chemist would react if I tried to tell him how to do chemistry, or like a radiologist would act if I tried to interpret x-rays, or similar to the way that a preacher frowns, if an untrained person tries to tell him how to be a pastor. Peter thought he knew how to fish and had just a little more expertise than Jesus. Still, Jesus had just healed his mother in law; Peter owed him big, so he humors the Messiah.

When he does, they catch such an enormous load of fish, that their boats are about to sink. This is an overwhelming miracle, and I want you to see Peter's reaction when he meets Jesus. It is not, "Whoa, this is fantastic!" Nor is it: "What a catch; I can retire." Peter's reaction is a little surprising to modern religion, for he is moved to trauma. Luke 5:8: "When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man.'" Peter immediately was aware of his sin when in the presence of the Lord. That should be instructive for us today.

This kind of Holiness applies to of God's other attributes.

- What difference does it make that God is Holy? (pay off)
- It defines his moral disposition as opposed to other ideas of God. That is, God is not purely utilitarian, nor is he ever immoral. He is always depended on to be holy; he can be no other.

The Biblical Reaction to holiness describes how our attitude ought to be toward God in Worship. If God is holy, casual treatment or unthinking overfamiliarity is ruled out. We must approach him in holiness. The very style of Worship is different if we focus on God's holiness. Celebration is one thing; but it cannot be allowed to crowd out the response to the holy God.

Heb. 12:28-29 commands: "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire." That applies to and colors every aspect of our Worship.

c. Holiness in God demands holiness in us. There is an ethical connection between this subject and how we behave. Scripture makes the linkage clear: "Be holy, for I am holy."

Neither did this originate in the NT. It occurs first in Lev. 11:44-45; Then a little later in Lev. 19:2 and Lev. 20:7. This holiness was a standard equally applicable in the Old as well as the New Testament. In each, our behavior is rooted in God's character. The key word is "for." There is a link between God and his expectations for his people.

We need to be reminded: Whenever we sin, we are not committing some trivial act. We are doing what God hates, and nourishing some habit/attitude that God despises. In contrast, "Holiness in the believer is nothing less than conformity to the moral character of God." (S64)

Jerry Bridges writes: "We need to cultivate in our own hearts the same hatred of sin God has. Hatred of sin as sin, not just as something disquieting or defeating to ourselves, but as displeasing to God, lies at the root of all true holiness. We must cultivate the attitude of Joseph who said when he was tempted, 'How then could I do this great evil, and sin against God?'" (The Pursuit of Holiness, p. 32).

Also, "without holiness, it is impossible to please the Lord.

d. Holiness, if understood, promotes humility not Pride. Remember Peter in Luke 5. His first reaction was to fall on his knees. I suggest that whenever you know God in his holiness, an indicator of that is the humility that bears fruit in one's life.

- God governs the universe in holiness. His righteousness more than qualifies him to govern the world.

Our attitude should be as follows:

Is. 8:13: The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread.

Is. 12:1-6 enjoins us to sing to the Lord in light of his glory.

Is. 17:7-8 tells us about people repenting. When they repent and "turn their eyes to the Holy One of Israel," they will not resort to idolatry.

Is. 29:22-24: When people acknowledge God's holiness, they "stand in awe of the God of Israel."

g. **Holiness is God's great plan and procession.** Each saint becomes a small part of God's holy project. If we are not holy, we contradict God's design. "Holiness is the only thing that distinguishes us from the reprobate part of the world." (Watson, p. 86)

In the epistles, the Scriptures are affirmed as holy (Rom. 1:2; 2 Tim. 3:15) and we are to present our bodies as sacrifices to God, which is our holy duty (Rom. 12:1). The Holy Spirit is our sanctifier, our bodies are the Temple of this Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). Children of believers are considered holy by God (1 Cor. 7:14) and we are to walk holy and blamelessly (Eph. 1:4; Col. 3:12). Believers have a holy calling (2 Tim. 1:9); in fact, we are called to be a holy nation (2 Pet. 2:9).

What happens if we subtract holiness from God? Of course, we mentally create an idol, a god that cannot be. For a number of reasons, we tend to minimize or ignore holiness. We frequently elevate God's goodness over his power or his love over his justice. Humans tend to prefer God's comfort over his overall character. If left to our own, we will invariably define God as exclusively or predominantly "love." The reason: our self-interest. We want God for what he'll do for us, not for who he truly is. That distortion, the subtraction of this attribute, creates an idol, a false-god. Here are some ways that the absence of holiness distorts the true God (summarized from Charnock, 2, 172-180):

1. "The holiness of God is injured in unworthy representations of God and imaginations of him in our own minds. . . . It is too common for men to fancy God not as his is, but as they would have him; strip him of his excellency for their own security. . . . We are apt to imagine God as we would have him. . . . ***If oxen and lions had hands, and could paint as we do, they would frame the images of their gods according to their own likeness and complexion.***"

- The holiness of God is impaired when we excuse or charge our sin to God. People frequently seek excuses for their sins and try to transfer the blame to God.

- "The holiness of God is injured when men will study arguments from the holy word of God to shelter their crimes . . . [or] when men will put up petitions to God to favor them in a wicked design."

We trample the holiness of God when we come to worship unprepared: "A holy God requires a holy worship; and if our best duties, having filth in every part as performed by us, are unmeet for God, how must more unsuitable are dead and dirty duties to a living and immense holiness. . . . We contemn, then, his perfection, when we come before him without due preparation as if God himself were impure . . . as if any blemished sacrifice was good enough for him . . . When we excite not those elevated frames of spirit which are due to such a being, when we think to put him off with a lame and imperfect service, we worship him not according to the excellency of his nature, but put a slight upon his majestic sanctity. "

When we charge the law of God with rigidness or imperfection, or when we hate the law of God in theory or in practice, we corrupt his holiness. Following Habakkuk, rather we must acknowledge that there is no friendliness between God and sin, the "natures of both are so directly and unchangeably contrary to one another. Holiness is the life of God' it endures as long as his life; he must be eternally averse from sin, he can live no longer than he lives in the hatred and loathing of it. If he should for one instant cease to hate it, he would cease to live. To be a holy God is as essential to him as to be a living God; and he would not be a living God but a dead god, if he were in the least point of time an unholy God. He cannot look on sin without loathing it; he cannot look on sin but in his heart rise against it. . . ."

Conclude with emphasis on grace:

God's holiness "frowns upon lapsed [fallen] nature, but smiles in the restorations made by the gospel. God's holiness in conjunction with his justice is terrible to a guilty sinner; but in conjunction with his mercy by the satisfaction of Christ it is sweet to a believing penitent. God's grace is based on his holiness. In our broken condition we turn to the holy God and are never disappointed. We have the comfort of knowing that our prayers are answered because God is too holy to deceive us. He keeps us until the last day, for God is too holy to desert his people once he has saved them by grace.

Pink: "That which his holiness demanded his grace has provided in Jesus Christ our Lord." (S43)

God's holiness is seen in creation, in his works (Ps. 145:17), in his law (Rom. 7:12), in his hatred of sin, and most clearly – albeit surprisingly – at the cross. God's holy atonement in the death of Jesus for his redeemed displays both God's moral perfection as well as his absolute abhorrence of sin. Charnock said: "Not all the vials of judgment that have or shall be poured out upon the wicked world, nor the flaming furnace of a sinner's conscience, nor the irreversible sentence pronounced against the rebellious demons, nor the groans of the damned creatures, give such a demonstration of God's hatred of sin, as the wrath of God let loose upon his son. Never did Divine holiness appear more beautiful and lovely than at the time our Savior's countenance was most marred in the midst of his dying groans." (Charnock, 2, 135)

"So in love is Christ with holiness that he will buy it with his blood for us." John Flavel (S60).

"Without a due sense of [God's holiness], we can never exalt God in our heart; and the most distinct conceptions we have of this, and the rest of his attributes, the more we glorify him." (Charnock, 2, 191)

Make this your goal, the prayer of Robert Murray McCheyne: "Lord make me as holy as a pardoned sinner can be." (S88) But also remember: "There is no holiness without warfare." (Ryle, S88)

"Happiness from its very nature cannot be an ultimate end, because to seek it is to fail to get it: 'He that finds his life shall lose it.' To seek holiness results in happiness, but not vice versa. Happiness is the effect, and holiness is the cause. Hence the command is, 'Be ye holy,' not 'Be ye happy.' Another proof that happiness is not an ultimate end like holiness is the fact that there are many kinds of happiness, but only one kind of holiness." Shedd, 358).

Pascal said, "The serene beauty of a holy life is the most powerful influence in the world next to the power of God."