



The Holiness of God

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One of the most important attributes for understanding God and ourselves is God's holiness.

When we catch a vision of God's holiness, we can regard many things in our lives as holy. When we lose a sense of God's holiness (as many have), then we lose the realization that anything is holy or unholy. In this latter case, we also lose a sense of our own sinful-ness, our need for God's grace, and the desperate plight of our culture.

The Hebrew word for holy is *quadosh*, and the Greek word is *hagios*. In both cases, the meaning is separateness or being set apart from that which is unclean. An encounter with God always produces awe and dread that leads to separation from sin.

In Isaiah 6:1-8, we see Isaiah's vision of God in the temple. He sees the Lord "sitting on a throne lofty and exalted" (vs. 1). Seraphim surround Him calling to each other, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory" (vs. 3). This triple repetition of a divine attribute is without parallel in the rest of the Bible. Scripture never says that God is "justice, justice, justice" or even "love, love, love," but it does say that He is "holy, holy, holy." The Hebrew does not have a grammatical way to express the comparative or the superlative (i.e., holier or holiest). The way it stresses the importance of something is by repetition. For instance, Genesis 14 describes a battle between various kings. At one point the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah flee and fall into the "tar pits" (vs. 10). In order to indicate the size and extent of these "tar pits," the Hebrew just repeats the word "pit." These "tar pits" are the "pit, pits." In other words, these are the pitiest pits you could find anywhere.

Similarly, when God is described as "holy, holy, holy," it underlines His utter purity.

He is set apart, One who inspires awe and is worthy of worship. The foundations of the temple start to tremble (vs. 4) and so does Isaiah himself. He cries out, "Woe is me, I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips" (vs. 5).



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This is the only time in Scripture that a prophet pronounces the prophetic judgment "woe" on himself. As Isaiah encounters God's holiness, he is acutely aware of his sin and the sinfulness of the society around him. Any vision of God's holiness leads to a sense of our own sin and makes us sensitive to the unholiness of the culture around us.

Isaiah is also particularly aware of the deficiency in his speech and the way of speaking around him. The central passage in Romans 3 that describes the pervasiveness of our sin also emphasizes the "lips." "There is none righteous, not even one...none who seeks for God...none who does good, not even one" (Rom. 3:10-12). It goes on to speak of the throat as an "open grave" (vs. 13), "tongues...deceiving" (vs. 13), lips have the "poi-son of asps" (vs. 13). The mouth contains "cursing and bitterness" (vs. 14). This emphasis ought to lead us to examine what comes out of our mouths, and to reflect on the unholy ways our culture influences our speech.

However, if Isaiah was simply left with this crushing sense of sin, he would be unfit for the ministry he was called to pursue. So God sends a seraphim with a burning coal from the altar to touch Isaiah's lips (vs. 6). In this way, Isaiah is told that "your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven" (vs. 7).

Then (and only then) the Lord asks, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” (vs. 8). Isaiah responds, “Here am I, send me!” (vs. 8). When Isaiah responds to God’s call, he is under no illusion about the degree of his sin-fulness. He is utterly dependent on God’s grace. In a similar way, when we each see our own sin, that does not make us unsuitable for ministry, but a candidate desperately desiring God’s grace. In fact, if we feel worthy of the ministry to which we have been called, we should beware.

Unless we grasp God’s holiness, we will no longer be “amazed” at his amazing grace. It is easy to take God’s grace for granted, and this is commonly done today. Rather than assuming God’s holiness and being amazed by His grace, we take for granted His grace and are amazed and offended by his holy wrath and judgment. Many presume on God’s grace by doing that which they know is wrong, rather than being deterred by a fear of His holiness. I’ve known significant leaders in the Christian community who went into adulterous affairs, presuming they would ask for forgiveness later. One leader of a college fellowship was greatly offended because he was asked to step down from his leadership position because he was living with his girlfriend (unmarried). This kind of presumption might be evidence that the person is unsaved (Matt. 7:21-23), or that they are unaware of the consequence of their sin or of the reality of God’s discipline (Heb. 12:5-14).

Why Should We Be Holy?

Our motive for being holy is not primarily to follow rules and laws, but to follow God Himself. We are to strive to be holy, “pursuing...the holiness without which no one can see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). But how can we be motivated to be holy? Why should we be holy? The answer to this question gives us a profound insight into what our motives should be.

We are to be holy because God is holy. I Peter 1:14-16: “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance. But like the Holy One who called you, be holy in all your behavior; Because it is written, ‘you shall be holy, for I am holy.’ ” The reason we are to be holy is because God is holy. We are to obey (vs. 14) not just because the Bible tells us to do so, but because of who God is—the nature of His character.

This also means that God’s commands are not arbitrary. In secular philosophy classes, the professor might raise a dilemma to put Christians on the spot: “Does God command something because it is good or is it good because God commands it?” Either side of the dilemma seems unacceptable. In the first case, God commands something because it is good—it seems that there is something higher than God; namely, “the good.” In the latter case—something is good because God commands it—smacks of arbitrariness in God. (God could have been evil and evil, good.)

What is the answer to the dilemma? It is that God is a law unto Himself. In other words, God’s commands are really a reflection of His nature. He commands the good because He *is* good, holiness because he is holy, justice because he is just, love because he is loving and so on. God’s commands also correspond to our own nature, being made in the image of God. God’s commands are not unduly restrictive, but show us how to be free and whole. They are like God’s “instruction manual” or God’s “prescription” for how we are to run the human “machine.” For instance, if you put water in the gas tank of your car, it not only violates the instruction manual for the type of fuel to be used, but it will make the car run erratically or even shut down. Again, if you don’t read the instructions for a medication, it might lead to a harmful or lethal drug interaction. God’s commands show us the way to live fully and joyously. To violate God’s commands means not only violating biblical teaching and offending God’s holy nature, but also breaking ourselves. It’s just like running full speed into a concrete wall—we do more damage to ourselves than to the wall. God certainly reveals His instruction about what holiness means in the Bible, but the ultimate reason for our obedience is the character of God Himself. The more we meditate on who God is, the more we see who we are to be. Of course, we are not going to be infinite, eternal, omnipresent, or self-existent. But we can emulate God’s goodness, justice, holiness, and love.

The Loss of the Holy

As our culture loses a sense of God’s holiness, we lose a sense that anything is holy. When we lose a vision of the beauty of His holiness, then there is an ugliness that creeps from the inside out, touching our relationships, churches, workplaces, buildings,

and ways of life. In the Old Testament there were holy places and holy spaces. The ground around the burning bush was holy (Ex. 3:5). The temple was holy (Isa. 64:11; Jon. 2:4; Hab. 2:20). There are holy utensils (I Chron. 9:29), garments (Ex. 29:21; Lev. 16:4), foods (I Sam. 21:4; Neh. 7:65), oil (Ex. 30:25, 31; Num. 35:13; Ezek. 42:13). The holiness of God sets apart concrete things as holy. Though we are not bound by the ceremonial law (fulfilled in Christ), *we are to now set apart all aspects of our lives as holy unto the Lord*. There is for us a holy meal (the Lord's supper), holy baptism, holy hands (I Tim. 2:8), and a holy calling (II Tim. 1:9). We are now to be holy in body and spirit (I Cor. 7:34) and to offer our bodies as a holy sacrifice (Rom. 12:1). We are to be ones described in Scripture as "saints" (literally "holy ones") (I Cor. 1:2). And as the body of Christ, we are to be a holy nation (I Peter 2:9) in the world. In other words, every aspect of our lives is to be dedicated as holy unto the Lord. There is a passage in Zechariah 14:20-21 that prophesies this extension of the holy from particular objects to all of life. These final two verses of Zechariah say, "In that day there will be inscribed on the bells of the horses 'HOLY TO THE LORD' and the cooking pots in the Lord's house will be like the bowls before the altar. And every cooking pot in Jerusalem and in Judah will be holy to the Lord of hosts..." The "bowls before the altar" (vs. 20) might be con-

sidered holy utensils because of their proximity to the holy altar. But there will come a time in the future, Zechariah prophesies, where every cooking pot in the Lord's house will be holy (not just those by the altar). In fact, in that day every cooking pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy (not just those in the Lord's house). This holiness will be so pervasive that even the smallest object such as bells on a horse's neck will be inscribed as "HOLY TO THE LORD." To truly regard every good created thing as holy requires a renewed vision of the beauty of God's holiness. Without this perspective, one area after the other will be stripped of the words, "Holy to the Lord."

Today, as never before, we need holy marriages, holy families, holy houses, holy hospitality, holy friends, holy vocations, etc. But these can only come as we gain a vision of God and his holiness that captivates us and transforms our vision from the inside out to all areas of life. Let us then devote ourselves fully to seeking to know God's holiness and to becoming individually and corporately what we were created to be—holy people worshipping a Holy God.

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