

The Holiness of God
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We're in a series of sermons entitled Days of Awe. We've talked about some of the awesome attributes of God like His justice and wrath, His grace and mercy and goodness and love.

If you were going to describe God with one word – what would it be? Now – God cannot be reduced down one attribute – He is all of His attributes all of the time!

Today I'm preaching a message on one of those attributes: The Holiness of God. The phrase "Holy, holy, holy" is found two times in the Bible – once in the Old Testament and once in the New. Both instances occurred when there was a revelation of God.

The prophet Isaiah had an incredible vision of God in Isaiah 6:1-3.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above Him were seraphs, each with six wings: with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory."

The Apostle John had a revelation of God that he shared in the book of Revelation. He saw the Lord surrounded by angels. Revelation 4:8 says:

Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."

The fact that God is called holy three times is important. It's a literary device used in Hebrew literature where repetition is a form of emphasis. In modern times, we can emphasize something through italics or bold type or underlining or exclamation points. But the Bible uses repetition. And only one characteristic of God is elevated to the third degree. The Bible isn't just saying that God is holy – or even holy, holy – But God is holy, holy, holy!

The Bible never says God is love, love, love or grace, grace, grace or wrath, wrath. It says that God is holy, holy, holy and the whole earth is full of His glory!

1- God's holiness is holier than we can comprehend

When we say God is holy – we are saying that He is morally perfect, sinless, completely righteous, pure and good, without any flaw or evil. It is the opposite of that which is evil, profane, common or ordinary.

Holiness means that God never has any evil action, thought or intent. Therefore, God is always blameless for any evil.

The essence of the word holy is to be set apart or separate from all else. Holiness is what separates God from everything else. It's what makes Him different and distinct from any person or anything in the universe. God is transcendent! He is infinitely above and beyond us. Exodus 15:11 says:

Who among the gods is like You, O Lord? Who is like You — majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?

The Complete Jewish Bible says:

Who is like You, Adonai, among the mighty? Who is like You, sublime in holiness, awesome in praises, working wonders?

Sublime means elevated, expanded, lofty, complete, absolute, supreme. God is so holy that it requires the Holy Spirit to reveal the knowledge of the holy to us! And when we begin to understand it – it causes astonishment and awe and godly reverence and fear.

God is not ten times or a hundred times holier than us. He is not a better version of the best holiness we know. He is infinitely holier than us. He is in an entirely different category of holiness and He is the only member!

For anything else to be holy means it is set apart and devoted to God. Think about the things that the Bible calls holy:

The Sabbath is holy. That means that a day of our week is different from the others. It's holy – it's set apart – it belongs to God – it's dedicated to God.

The tithe is called holy. A percentage of our money is different from the rest of our money. What's different? It's holy – it's set apart – it belongs to God – it's dedicated to God.

And in the Bible we are called saints – holy ones – those set apart to God. That's awesome, but...

2- Revelation of God's holiness always leads to revelation of our lack of holiness.

When Isaiah saw the holiness of God, he said this in Isaiah 6:5

"Woe is me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."

When biblical prophets like Isaiah spoke their messages, they were announcing either good news or bad news. The good news was preceded by the word “blessed.” For example, when Jesus gave good news in the Sermon on the Mount, He said Blessed are those...

But He also spoke judgment on some, like religious hypocrites. Those judgements are preceded by the word “woe.” When the word of God is preceded by “woe” it is announcing doom. Woe unto you...

Isaiah’s use of the word “woe” is extraordinary because he pronounced doom upon himself! “Woe is me! I am ruined. I am undone. I am falling apart.” You see – when Isaiah compared himself to other people, he saw himself as a righteous man, full of integrity and virtue. But one glimpse of the holiness of God changed all that.

You see – when you see yourself in the light of God’s holiness – you see that you are unrighteous, unclean and unholy compared to Him. When Isaiah saw God in the beauty of His holiness, he understood who God was and he understood who Isaiah was! He saw his sin and his guilt and he was in anguish!

But thankfully, the God who is holy is also a God of grace! Aren’t you glad for that? That’s why...

3- Our holy God made a provision to cleanse our sins

Isaiah 6:6-8 says:

Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

God did not allow Isaiah to remain in the anguish of guilt and condemnation. He immediately commanded an angel to jump into action. And that angel took a burning hot coal from the altar and pressed it to the lips of Isaiah. Isaiah was refined, forgiven, cleansed and made pure by God’s holy fire. Then and only then did he hear the voice of God.

When we are living in sin and rebellion against God – we have a hard time hearing God. But when we repent and are forgiven – our ears are open to God’s voice.

We find this pattern throughout history. A person gets a revelation of God that reveals their own inadequacy. They repent and God forgives them. Then they hear the voice of God and are willing to be sent wherever God wants to do whatever God wants.

Before we receive this revelation we usually say – “Here I am – send him or her.” But once God has us where He wants us – we become willing to be the sent ones who speak His message to those around us. God alone is holy – yet He said in 1 Peter 1:16

"Be holy, for I am holy."

He did not say “Be holy AS I am holy” because that would be impossible! We cannot be as holy as God because absolute holiness belongs to God alone! But we must deal with Bible verses like Hebrews 12:14 which says:

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.

Holiness means to be separated unto God – dedicated to God – consecrated and sanctified. Notice this is something we pursue – it takes effort and time.

To do this, we need to understand the difference between righteousness and holiness. Righteousness is the state of being right with God. When we are born again we are made right with God by the sacrifice of Christ – our sins are forgiven, our past is over, the old person we were is dead and we are new creations with a new future.

This is not something we can attain in our own strength or effort. In fact, Isaiah 64:6 says:

All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.

The best we can do apart from Christ is filthy in God’s sight. We are unable to make ourselves holy. But thank God that 2 Corinthians 5:21 says:

God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.

Christ – who is righteous – took on our sin – so that we might become righteous – right with God – in Christ! Not in ourselves!

When we are born again we become as righteous as Christ. To some of you that sounds almost blasphemous. You can hardly believe it. That’s because we confuse righteousness and holiness. We confuse our position with our condition.

Positionally - we were saved the very moment that we commit our lives to Jesus Christ. We were saved from Hell and saved from the wrath of God. And we are made righteous – right with God. But – our condition is not holy yet. Yes I’m righteous in Christ – but in myself I still have some changing to do! I still have some growing to do!

What is happening to us is this: we are becoming who we really are. Holiness means to be set apart. It is the process of sanctification where we are set apart from all those things that are ungodly in us and our condition becomes conformed to the image of Christ.

We need to get so firmly established in our righteousness that nothing can move us off it. However, that does not mean we can still live any way we want without regard to what God wants for us. And what does God want for us? 1 Peter 1:15-16 says:

But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

What God wants for us is holiness. When you confuse righteousness and holiness – you get into one of two errors – legalism or license.

Legalism comes from the misbelief that we can earn righteousness by what we do. But true righteousness only comes through faith in Jesus Christ. Romans 6 talks about how before we were saved, we were slaves to sin. Verse 19 says:

Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness.

Notice that righteousness leads to holiness. People mess up when they reverse this order, thinking that holiness leads to righteousness. Thinking that legalistically keeping a list of rules will make you right with God. Wrong! Righteousness is being made right with God and that only comes through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Romans 3:21-22 says:

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

When we get grounded in who we are in Christ – when we truly understand righteousness – being right with God based on faith in Jesus – then we can focus on becoming holy. I love Hebrews 10:14, which says:

By one sacrifice He has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

What? If we are already made forever perfect, why do we need to be made holy? Because when we are born again our spirits are already changed, already perfect, totally right with God. That's who we really are. But our souls have a lot of changing to do. That's why God has us all in this rebuilding process. We are already righteous – but we are becoming holy. Righteousness is the made perfect forever part. Those who are being made holy is the holiness part.

We are perfect in God's sight by the blood of Jesus, but we are not yet holy. We are being made holy. We are in the process.

A misunderstanding of righteousness can also lead to license. People fall into this when they start thinking – I'm right with God so it doesn't matter what I do – how I live. It does matter to God what we do and how we live. 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 says:

May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it.

The Lord promises to sanctify us – but as in anything else we receive from God – we must cooperate fully with Him. 2 Corinthians 7:1 says:

Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

Some verses say God purifies us – some say purify yourselves. This shows us that human cooperation is included in God's completed work. In His grace God imparts the will and power for us to be holy. There is a saving work which God only can do for us; but there is also a work which we must do for ourselves.

But, what must we do to approach a holy, awesome God? Some of us hear the verses like Psalm 24:3-4 - *Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart...* and we feel helpless and hopeless. We think we must clean ourselves up. Even then – how clean is clean enough? How good is good enough?

I say we will never get clean enough, pure enough or good enough on our own to enter the presence of God. We need something more than what we can do on our own! Hebrews 10:19-22 says:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, His body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith...

Our confidence in entering the presence of God only comes by the new and living way – the blood of Jesus. The sinless Lamb of God became sin and the object of God's wrath on our behalf. God had no anger toward Jesus! But every sin ever committed by any person was placed on Christ and He bore the punishment for our sins! Romans 3:23-25 says:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness.

The word propitiation is also translated as sacrifice or atonement. It means that Jesus paid the price for our sins. Now – because of Jesus – God is not angry with us anymore! The interesting thing about the word propitiation is that it is literally the same word used for the mercy seat – the lid of the Ark of the Covenant. This was the place where the High Priest sprinkled the blood of a lamb to atone for the sins of the people.

That was a shadow of what was to come through Jesus Christ! Hebrews 9:11-14 says:

But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

I love that it says, “how much more shall the blood of Christ cleanse you.”

Are you a sinner? Then you need to see how much more the blood of Christ forgives you!

Are you abounding in sin? Then you need to see how much more God’s grace abounds!

Are you addicted? Then you need to see how much more God can set you free!

Are you unrighteous? Then you need to see how much more God makes you righteous!

Are you lost? Then you need to see how much more God can save you!

If you believe God is loving – good – powerful – all knowing – He is so much more!
If you believe that God is holy - how much more is He holy!

God is not holy because He conforms to a standard – He is the standard!

God is not holy because He keeps the rules – He makes the rules!

God is not holy because He tries really hard to be!

It takes no effort for God to be holy – He alone is holy, holy, holy!!!!

The Lord God Almighty! Who was and is and is to come!