

Basic Doctrine – God

(L8) – The Holiness of God

Lesson 8**The Holiness of God**

The basic meaning of holiness is to be separate or to set something apart from that which is common.

The root meaning of the word “to be holy” (or sanctify) is not certain though many have suggested it comes from the idea of “to cut” or “to divide” and thus means “to separate” or “set apart.” It refers to the realm of the sacred, as distinct from all other things.

“Although the word “holy” carries a strong moral connotation, that is not its primary significance. To speak of God’s holiness is first of all to speak of His distinctiveness, or His separateness, from all other things. He is holy in His transcendence over all creation. “He is exalted over all the nations,” the psalmist declares, “He is holy” (Psalm 99:2, 3; see also verses 5, 9). He is “the high and lofty One . . . whose name is holy,” and who lives in “a high and holy place” (Isaiah 57:15; see also 6:1).” . . .

Because God is holy, everything associated with Him is also holy or sanctified.

The city of Jerusalem is called the holy city (Neh. 11:1). The priests’ clothing and the shovel used for the ashes of the altar were also called holy. Even the dirt that Moses stood on was called “holy ground” (Exo. 3:5).

If cities, clothing, shovels, or dirt, are holy because of their connection with God, then it’s natural to assume that holiness must also characterize God’s people and their behavior. God refers to His people as a “holy assembly” (Exo. 12:16) and a holy nation” (Exo. 19:6). He says, “I have set you apart from the nations to be My own” (Lev. 20:26). Though not every individual within Israel was a believer, the nation as a whole was set apart from all other nations because the Holy One of Israel called them His people.

Of course, holiness is also tied to behavior and moral purity. God who transcends all creation is also separate from all the evil and moral pollution which defiles the creation. His “eyes are too pure to look on evil” (Hab. 1:13) and only the person who has “clean hands and a pure heart” can stand in His presence (Psa. 24:3, 4; see also Lev. 16:30). God often reminded His people that they were to be holy in their behavior because of their relationship with Him: “Be holy for I, the LORD your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:2; see also 11:44; 20:7, 20:26; 1 Peter 1:16). Much of the law was given to instruct Israel in holiness, and deal with the times they failed to be holy.

This principle of holiness that is found in the OT remains true for the New Testament believer. “Christians are no less God’s people than was ancient Israel, and no less accountable to God than Israel was, but their holiness is expressed in ways that are appropriate to their own historical moment” (Jobes, I Peter, 114-115). The apostle Paul told us, “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1; see also I Thess. 5:23).

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READING 1:

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Sam Storms

What does it mean to say that God is holy? Most people think of moral rectitude or righteousness or goodness, and that is certainly true. To be holy is to be characterized by purity and blamelessness and integrity, both in terms of one's essence and one's activity. In this sense, God's holiness and his righteousness are somewhat synonymous. He is described in the OT as "too pure to behold evil" and intolerant of evil (Hab. 1:12-13). But this is only a secondary way in which God is said to be holy. We need to understand the primary thrust of the word.

A. *The Biblical evidence*

God is regularly identified in Scripture as "the Holy One". See Job 6:10; Isa. 40:25; 43:15; Ezek. 39:7; Hosea 11:9; Hab. 1:12; 3:3. He is also called "the Holy One of Israel" in 2 Kings 19:22; Isa. 1:4; 43:3 (a total of 25x in Isaiah alone); Jer. 50:29; 51:5; and elsewhere. In Isa. 57:15 God is described as "the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy." God's holiness is often associated with his majesty, sovereignty, and awesome power (Ex. 15:11-12; 19:10-25; Is. 6:1-4).

Holiness is so much the essence of who God is that Amos speaks of him as swearing "by his holiness" (4:2). This is simply another way of saying that "the Lord God has sworn by himself" (6:8). In fact, God's name is qualified by the adjective "holy" in the OT more often than all other qualities or attributes combined!

The root meaning of the Hebrew noun "holiness" (*qodes*) and the adjective "holy" (*qados*) comes from a word that means "to cut" or "to separate," and thus to be distinct from and set apart. That the term did not originally refer to ethical purity is seen from its use in describing prostitutes(!) who were "set apart" or "devoted" to pagan deities such as Baal and Asherah (see Gen. 38:21; Hosea 4:14). Bloesch points out that "in Israel's history holiness could be applied to nonpersonal things, places and even pagan gods (cf. Dan. 4:8,9; 5:11). The ground around the burning bush is holy (Ex. 3:5) as are the temple (Is. 64:11; Jon. 2:4; Hab. 2:20), days (Ex. 20:8; Deut. 5:12; Is. 58:13), utensils (1 Chron. 9:29), garments (Ex. 29:21; Lev. 16:4), food (1 Sam. 21:4; Neh. 7:65), oil (Ex. 30:25,31; Num. 35:25; Ps. 89:20) and offerings (2 Chron. 35:13; Ezek. 42:13)" (God the Almighty, 138).

The Greek equivalent is *hagios* and its derivatives. The point is that God is separate from everyone and everything else. He alone is Creator. He is altogether and wholly other, both in his character and his deeds. He is transcendently different from and greater than all his creatures in every conceivable respect. To put it in common terms, "God is in a class all by himself."

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We often speak of something that is outstanding or has superior excellence as being "a cut above" the rest. That is what God is. As R. C. Sproul put it, "He is an infinite cut above everything else" (*The Holiness of God*, 55). Holiness, then, is not primarily a reference to moral or ethical purity. It is a reference to transcendence. So where does the concept of purity come from? Sproul explains:

"We are so accustomed to equating holiness with purity or ethical perfection that we look for the idea when the word *holy* appears. When things are made holy, when they are consecrated, they are set apart unto purity. They are to be used in a pure way. They are to reflect purity as well as simply apartness. Purity is not excluded from the idea of the holy; it is contained within it. But the point we must remember is that the idea of the holy is never exhausted by the idea of purity. It includes purity but is much more than that. It is purity and transcendence. It is a **transcendent purity**" (57; emphasis mine).

Holiness, then, is ***that in virtue of which God alone is God alone. Holiness is moral majesty.*** This unmistakable biblical emphasis on the transcendent inviolability of God runs counter to the tendency in some theological circles to merge God with his creation. **But God's immanence is relational and redemptive, not ontological.** God cannot be identified with his creation, whether it be in the unfolding purpose of history or the religious and psychological experience of people. "His immanence," notes Bloesch, "is an act of his freedom, not a quality of his being. Just as he freely relates to his creation, so he is also free to withdraw himself from his creation" (*God the Almighty*, 24).

This tension between divine transcendence and immanence is seen in an interesting paradox in the title for God, "Holy One of Israel." The words "Holy One" point to God's otherness, his "set-apartness", so to speak. As we shall see, to be holy is to transcendently above the creation. Yet, he is the Holy One "*of Israel*"! He has given himself to a people: they are his people and he is their God. Although transcendent and lofty, he is also immanent and loving. His eternal distinctiveness as God does not prohibit or inhibit him from drawing near in grace and mercy to those with whom he is in covenant relationship.

"For thus says the high and exalted One who lives forever, whose name is Holy, 'I dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite'" (Isa. 57:15).

"Thus says the Lord, 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where then is a house you could build for me' . . . But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at my word" (Isa. 66:1-2).

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B. *Holiness as the "mysterium tremendum"*

Earlier this century, German scholar Rudolph Otto wrote a book titled *The Idea of the Holy* in which he described the concept of the holy as the *mysterium tremendum*, or the "awful mystery". Holiness, said Otto, is something which evokes awe and amazement. It draws us, yet frightens us. There is both dread (think of Isaiah's experience) and curiosity (think of Moses' desire to "see God's glory") when one encounters the holy. He writes:

"The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its 'profane,' non-religious mood of everyday experience. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering. It has its crude barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of whom or what? In the presence of that which is a *mystery* inexpressible and above all creatures" (pp. 12-13).

READING 2 – Hodge, *Systematic Theology* Vol 1 (page 414)

§ 11. *Holiness of God.*

This is a general term for the moral excellence of God. In [1 Sam. ii. 2](#), it is said, "There is none holy as the Lord;" no other Being absolutely pure, and free from all limitation in his moral perfection. "Thou Holy One of Israel," is the form of address which the Spirit puts into the lips of the people of God. "Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at his holy hill; for the Lord our God is Holy." ([Ps. xcix. 9.](#)) "Holy and reverend is his name." ([Ps. cxi. 9.](#)) "Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity." ([Hab. i. 13.](#)) "Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for Thou only art Holy." ([Rev. xv. 4.](#)) Holiness, on the one hand, implies entire freedom from moral evil; and, upon the other, absolute moral perfection. Freedom from impurity is the primary idea of the word. To sanctify is to cleanse; to be holy, is to be clean. Infinite purity, even more than infinite knowledge or infinite power, is the object of reverence. Hence the Hebrew word $\Psi\text{IT}\bar{\eta}$, as used in Scripture, is often equivalent to venerandus." The Holy One of Israel," is He who is to be feared and adored. Seraphim round about the throne who cry day and night, Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts, 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. It is because of his holiness, that God is a

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consuming fire. And it was a view of his holiness which led the prophet to exclaim, “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 mine eyes have seen the king, the Lord of hosts.” ([Is. vi. 5.](#))