

The Holiness of God

An Attribute First Among Equals

Anthony J. Carter

The Holiness of God
© 2009 by Anthony J. Carter

Published by East Point Books
A ministry of East Point Church
PO Box 90818
East Point, GA 30364

All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission.

Printed in the United States of America.

Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 10

Q: How did God create man?

A: God created man male and female, after his own image, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, with dominion over the creatures.

How do we know God? We know God through the means by which he has delighted to reveal himself. First, we know him through his self-revelation in nature. When we observe the course and orderliness of nature we are reminded that such testifies to the existence and nature of God. The beauty and serenity of the sunset; the vast and intimidating ocean; the height and majesty of the mountains; the complexity of the human brain, and the simplicity of the human touch each speaks to us about God and tells us something of his character and nature. Yet God has not only revealed himself in nature, but has also told us much about himself through the Bible, the inspired Word of God.

In the Bible we have the written revelation of God. There we read of God's actions and doings among the peoples of the earth. In the Bible we read of God's ways, of his desires and dislikes; of his promises and judgments; of his blessings and his curses. In this, we come to understand God better and learn more about him because we come to know more of his attributes - those personal qualities that make God, well...God.

Though we understand God according to the many attributes revealed in the Bible and in nature, we might say that actually God has only one attribute. We talk about the many and various characteristics

and attributes of God (i.e. the love of God, mercy of God, power of God, justice of God, etc.) and well we should. Yet, if we are rightly thinking, God has only one attribute. It is the attribute of “Godness.” In this, God is unique. Only God has the divine attribute and perfection of godness. Godness is God being God. All that it is for God to be God can be called godness. And thus, when we speak of God’s attributes of love, power, justice, mercy, etc., we are actually speaking in the subcategories of the one attribute - godness. These subcategories or attributes help us to understand and grasp what ultimately is incomparable and incomprehensible – namely Godness.

Subsequently, in seeking to understand God, we rightly spend our time in the subcategories seeking to understand the individual attributes which together reveal the God of heaven. One such attribute is holiness.

God’s Holiness is Primus Inter Pares

It could be argued that among the attributes of God, holiness is the *primus inter pares* or the first among equals. The perfection of God is that he has all of his attributes in perfect fullness, balance, and proportion. Unlike you and me, God is not more loving one day and more righteous the next. God is not more

just one day, and more merciful the next. God is all of his attributes all the time. And, he is fully all of his attributes all of the time. For example, you may know me to be a kind and righteous person. My wife may even tell you that I am a patient and compassionate husband (just for the sake of argument). And yet I can honestly say that if I am kind, I am not kind all the time. If I am patient, I am not as patient as I could be or as I should be. Yet, when we talk about the patience of God, we mean that God is always patient. He is as patient as he could be and as he should be. The same could be said of all his attributes. God is all of his attributes in fullness, all of the time.

Nevertheless, when we come to the holiness of God we could make the qualification that among the attributes and perfections of God, holiness is the first among equals. While the Scriptures make much of God in the various and multifaceted ways in which he is revealed, it would seem that no other attribute has more import for the revelation of God in the world than does his holiness. As J.I. Packer has rightly said,

‘Holy’ is the word which the Bible uses to express all that is distinctive and transcendent in the revealed nature and character of the Creator, all that brings home to us the infinite distance and difference that there

is between Him and ourselves. Holiness in this sense means, quite comprehensively, the ‘God-ness’ of God, everything about Him which sets Him apart from man.

No attribute is spoken of more frequently, discussed with more potency, or sounded with more emphasis than is the holiness of God. The angels are said to sing and proclaim in antiphonal splendor as they gather around the throne of God, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory” (Isa. 6:3). Furthermore, we are told that the four living creatures around the throne of God never cease day and night from saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come” (Rev. 4:8). This taking of God’s holiness to the third degree is unique among the attributes of God given in the Bible. RC Sproul reminds us of this truth when he writes:

Only once in sacred Scripture is an attribute of God elevated to the third degree. Only once is a characteristic of God mentioned three times in succession. The Bible says that God is holy, holy, holy. Not that He is merely holy, or even holy, holy. He is holy, holy, holy. The Bible never says that God is love, love, love; or mercy, mercy, mercy; or wrath, wrath, wrath; or justice, justice, justice. It

does say that He is holy, holy, holy, that the whole earth is full of His glory.

If the Bible had just said “God is holy,” it would be enough of a description for us to take serious the purity, perfection, and sinlessness of God. Yet, the Bible wants to emphasize the holiness of God and give us reason to consider with more awe the wonderful purity and perfection of God.

Holiness appears to be at the heart of God’s being. It is that by which God swears. We see this in Psalm 89:35: “Once for all I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David.” And he says through the prophet Amos: “The Lord God has sworn by his holiness that, behold, the days are coming upon you” (Amos 4:2). We tend to swear by that which is dear to us.

You remember in our youthful, irreverent days (some of us are still in our youthful, irreverent days) how we would say, “Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.” We would say this because we wanted to give the assurance that what we said was true. We would sometimes even say something as foolish as “I swear on my mother’s grave,” even if our mother was not dead. But we said this because we wanted to emphasize that our word was true, and therefore we tied it closely to that which was most precious to us,

namely our own lives or the life and memory of our mother.

Apparently there is nothing as dear to God as is his own holiness. And thus he swears by it. In other words, God swears by himself, by his own name because his name is holy. In the Bible he is the Holy One of Jacob. He is the Holy One of Israel. In fact, in the Bible he is referred to as Holy more often than he is called Almighty. Seventeenth century theologian Stephen Charnock makes the point concerning the use of holy in describing God:

This is affixed as an epithet to his name more than any other: you never find it expressed, His mighty name, or His wise name; but His great name, and most of all His holy name.

Therefore, when God swears by his name, he swears by his holiness, and thus he swears by himself. The writer of Hebrews reminds us of this when he writes that when God swore an oath to Abraham, he swore by himself because there was no one or nothing greater by which he could swear (Heb. 6:13ff). He swore by himself, by his name, by his holiness. This holiness is his pleasure.

God is Holy and Therefore God is Happy

His name is holy and his holiness permeates all that God does and all that God is. And it is that by which we see that God is also happy. Make no mistake about it; the God of the Bible is a happy God. We are reminded in the Bible that our God is in heaven and he does whatever pleases him (Ps. 115:3).

I don't know about you, but nothing makes me happier than when I am able to do as I please when I please. For me those times are few and far between. Not so for God. The pleasure of God - the eternal bliss, the delight and felicity of God - is the manifestation and working out of the holiness of God. The beauty of God's happiness is the beauty of his holiness. God is not as happy because he exists eternally as he is happy because he is holy. That which is most holy is most happy. Consequently, it should be argued that the longing the world has for happiness is actually a longing for holiness.

Holiness is the state of being without sin. It is the perfection of virtue in the purity of godliness. Heaven is a happy place because heaven is a holy place. The human heart has woven into it a desire for heaven, which ultimately is a desire for holiness. The craving of human beings to create a utopia upon the earth

is nothing more than the outworking of our innate desire for perfection or the Perfect One. Yet, perfection is not promised in this life, only in the life to come. Consequently, it is not the hope of the Christian that this earth would become heaven, but that Heaven would once again come to the earth. It was once before.

There was a time when heaven was on earth. Perfection and holiness was a place on earth. God himself brought it when in the beginning he created heaven and earth. In the original creation God displayed both his holiness and his happiness.

To look at the Bible's account of creation is to not only see and know the holiness and happiness of God, but it is also reminds us of the implications of God's holiness for our lives everyday. Nothing is more indicative of God's relationship to his creation than is God's holiness. In fact, there are four truths of which the first few chapters of Genesis remind us concerning the holiness of God that have serious importance for our everyday lives in him. These four truths concerning God's holiness give us insight into who God is, what God has done, and thus how we might know and worship him better:

God's holiness reminds us:

1. That God is different from His creation.
2. That God is separate from His creation.
3. What God demands from and desires for His creation.
4. What God has provided for His creation.

God's Holiness Reminds Us that God is Different from His Creation

In Genesis 1:31 we read:

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

In the beginning, God created the world pristine. The world as created by God was good and righteous. It was holy. He placed Adam and Eve in this holy pristine place because they themselves were holy and pristine. They were without sin. In this they reflected the pristine nature, holy character of God, their creator. The holiness was a necessary aspect to creation because a holy God can only create holy things. The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks:

Q: How did God create man?

A: God created man male and female, after

his own image, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, with dominion over the creatures.

The angels were created holy. The light of the day and the darkness of night were holy. The birds of the air, the fish of the sea, and the beast of the field were all holy. And the man and the woman, whom God had made in His image and placed as His vicegerent over all His creation, were holy as well. The innate holiness of God causes everything that flows from him to be holy as well. Just as his love is a holy love; his justice is a holy justice; his power is a holy power; his knowledge is a holy knowledge, so too is his creation a holy creation. The holiness of God's creation is understood in that it God pronounced it "very good."

Yet, while all that God created was holy, there was a remarkable difference, an even infinite difference between the holiness of God and the holiness of the creation. The holiness of creation was a created holiness. God's holiness is uncreated. The holiness of creation is a holiness that could and did change. God's holiness is an immutable holiness. It is a holiness that is defined by the fact of Mal. 3:6 where God declares, "I am the Lord, I do not change." Creation was created holy, yet with the potential to lose its holiness. God has always been and will always be holy. The Bible declares in 1Sam. 2:2: "There is none holy like the

Lord; there is none besides you...”

The uniqueness and even *sui generis* nature of God’s holiness is clearly seen in the response of the angels, who are said to be continuously around his throne. The Bible reminds us in Isaiah 6 that the angels gathered around the throne of God pay homage to God in unique, demonstrative, and illustrative ways. Speaking of the vision which Isaiah saw of the company of heaven and the Lord seated on his throne, the Bible says:

Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”

The seraphim (angels) are conscious of their own creatureliness as they are in the presence of the holy Lord. They who are created holy, and themselves have no sin, cover their faces and their feet. This covering of themselves in the Lord’s presence illustrates for us the uniqueness of God’s holiness even from that of the holy angels. God is of a superior, infinitely superior quality, demanding willing submission and worship from the highest and purest of creatures. Again Charnock has stated:

Though God hath crowned the angels with an unspotted sanctity, and placed them in a habitation of glory, yet, as illustrious as they are, they have an unworthiness in their own nature to appear before the throne of so holy a God; their holiness grows dim and pale in his presence.

Thus, we should understand that even in the perfection of creation, the holiness of our creator God is different from the holiness of his creation.

God's Holiness Reminds Us that God is Separate from His Creation

God in His holiness is not only different from His creation, but He is also separate from His creation. As wonderful, beautiful, and good as the original creation was, it was still not God. God made the tree, but He did not become the tree. God made the birds of the air and the beasts of the field, but He did not become a bird or a beast. God made the man and the woman, but He did not become the man or the woman.

The man and woman were created in God's image. They received, inspired from God, their breath and even spirit of life. They received reasoning capacities, feeling, and affections. They were created in the image of God and were to reflect God in their thinking,

reasoning, feelings, and conduct. In all of these, they were to demonstrate the essential qualities of holiness in the world.

When God put Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and gave them reign and rule over the entire world, he established them as a holy people in a holy place for his own glory. They were to remain holy, so long as they obeyed and walked in his way. Thus, God in his goodness revealed to them how they could remain in the state of purity and grace. He told them that theirs was the world and all that was in it. According to the Bible:

And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

They had free reign and could have had at their pleasure all the fruit and vegetation they could consume. Not only did they have God and each other, but they had all the resources of earth at their disposal and command. God blessed them with the riches of the earth and told them not only to enjoy the garden, but

to spread the garden so that the entire world would be their playhouse and dominion. In all of this, God gave them only one small caveat. He required of them only one small measure of restraint to demonstrate their love and worship of Him. There was a tree which God had planted in the Garden from which God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

Holiness is not only expressed in what we do; holiness is also expressed in what we don't do. Adam and Eve experienced holy communion with God in that they did as God said to do. According to his command, they lived in and cultivated the Garden. They also experienced this holy communion in that they did not do what God forbid them from doing. As long as they did not partake of the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they experienced a sweet, blessed, holy walk with God.

To walk with the Lord is to obey his word. The communion that Adam and Eve experienced was a com-

munion based in the goodness of God in creating a man and woman who reflected him in such a way as to have the holiness and purity necessary to dwell in his presence. Truly the relationship that Adam and Eve had with God was far superior to that of any of their posterity. Their purity allowed them to experience the presence of God like none other. They were not hindered by the sinfulness of their flesh, the fallenness of their thoughts, or the fickleness of their emotions.

Yet, remarkably, Adam and Eve sinned. They disobeyed the law of God and mistakenly determined that they could live as God. And rather than moving them closer to God, their sin actually moved them away from God and revealed the great gulf that existed even between them and God.

You see, when Adam and Eve sinned, they lost their created holiness. And not only did they lose their created holiness, but so too did all creation. Not only did Adam and Eve's world lose its holiness, but all subsequent worlds, including yours and mine, lost theirs as well. The sin of Adam and Eve not only separated them from God, but it separated all of those who would come after Adam and Eve (including you and me) from God.

The sin of Adam and Eve not only affected Adam and

Eve, but it affected the birds and the bees, the flowers and the trees. And yet, it not only affected the flowers and trees, but it affected all those who would come after Adam and Eve. The Bible says, Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned (Rom. 5:12).

Though Adam and Eve's sin affected all of creation and all those who would come after them, it did not affect God. The holiness of God did not change. The glory of the Creator is that He is not affected by the creation. The mutability of the creation in no way affects the immutability of the Creator.

Walter Chalmers Smith captured this truth in the hymn, *Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise*:

To all, life thou givest, to both great and
small;
In all life thou livest, the true life of all;
We blossom and flourish like leaves on the
tree,
Then wither and perish, but naught changeth
thee.

While God has created the world, and thus is in the world, he yet remains separate from the world and unchanged by its frailty and mutability. As the Bi-

ble says, God is not only in the world, but he is also above and beyond the world (Eph. 4:6).

Consequently, we can never look around the world and see the awfulness and sinfulness of sin and think in some way God's holiness is affected by it. Sin stains men and women. Sin stains the skies and the seas, but the Holy One of heaven is untouched and unstained by our sin. Holy he was when he created and holy he remains. The Bible says that our Holy Lord "is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 12:8).

Just as his holiness is not changed by the change in creation, so too is his demand for holiness unchanged. Just as the holy character of God demanded holiness from our first parents Adam and Eve, he still demands holiness from us. His holy character has not changed and neither has his demands.

God's Holiness Reminds Us of what God Demands from and Desires for His Creation.

Fundamentally, God demands obedience to His word. The holiness of God demands that those who would be with Him and know Him would be holy as well. This holiness is manifested in obedience. Adam and Eve could maintain their purity, holiness, and thus fellowship by living according to God's word.

Holiness was possible for Adam and Eve by keeping God's word perfectly. When Adam and Eve failed to keep God's word, they forfeited the holiness that was theirs and thus realized the difference and the separation between God and his creation.

Nevertheless, God's demands for holiness have not changed. Don't be deceived; God is still calling people to holiness. The change in creation did not change God's requirements. Adam and Eve's disobedience did not change God's demand for obedience. As one writer has said,

God is a lover of righteousness, goodness and truth, 'a holy God,' who delights in his own purity and everything else that conforms to his law. He is 'the Holy One of Israel,' who demands holiness from his moral creatures. 'I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy' (Lev. 11:44; 19:2; 1Pet. 1:15-16).

The command for holiness in the Scriptures is unmistakable. The interesting element in God's holiness is that the immutability of God demands that he require from us what he required from Adam. Why does God demand such holiness, such obedience? He does so because the consequences of not having holi-

ness are devastating. Our God can not have fellowship with the unholy. And thus, he demands holiness not for his sake but for ours. If we are not holy, we are denied that which we need most, namely his love and fellowship.

Have you ever loved someone who did not love you back? If you have ever had this emotional misfortune, you know that it can be devastating. When we desire to give ourselves to someone in love and they refuse our advances and deny us the relationship we desire, we are hurt. We are hurt because we are missing or being denied that which we sincerely believe will make us happy. However, when God loves us and we don't love him back, we can understand that he is sad as well. Yet, his sadness is not because he is missing something, but because we are missing something - namely the love and fellowship for which we were created.

The disobedience of Adam and Eve led to a separation from God. They lost their holiness and thus they lost intimate and immediate access to and relationship with God. In a real sense, they did not know what they had until they had lost it. And once they had lost it, they had no means of getting it back. At least, no means except one.

Here is the crux of the matter. Here is the heart of the message of the Bible. Here is the grand and glorious truth of the holiness of God. The holiness that God requires is the holiness that God provides. God's holiness is a gracious holiness. It was the church father Augustine who said, "God command whatever you will. But God grant what you command." That which is unholy cannot and will not become holy by its own effort. When Adam and Eve lost their holiness and all creation with them, they had no way of recreating that holiness. How could they? That which is unholy could never make or create that which is holy. Impossible!

Holiness only comes from that which is holy. Can an unrighteous root produce righteous fruit? Of course not! Can the unclean thing produce the clean? No. The holiness that God demands is the holiness only God can provide. When Adam and Eve fell into sin, they lost their holiness and their covering. They and their sin were exposed. Yet, God moved graciously to provide for them the covering which they could not provide for themselves. Whereas Adam and Eve made for themselves fig leaves to cover their sin, God made for them covering from animal skins. God sacrificed for them to have a covering, which pointed to the grand sacrifice that he would make for the covering of all his people.

The fellowship was lost when the holiness was lost. The holiness was lost when obedience was forsaken. In Christ, God has made it possible for humanity to have fellowship again. Through the active and passive obedience of Christ, God has provided holiness for His people. This is a wonderful and glorious truth. The holiness which God has provided in Christ makes it possible for God's people to have fellowship with him again. The holiness and thus fellowship, forsaken by Adam through disobedience, are the holiness and fellowship restored in Christ through his obedience unto death, even death on the Cross.

The Bible is clear, "without holiness, no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). The most important question for us to ask and answer is, "Where are you going to get holiness?" How are you going to work it up? If you will dwell in the holy presence of the Holy One, where are you going to get your holiness? Again, the gracious and glorious truth is that the holiness God requires is the holiness God provides. He has provided it in his son, Jesus Christ.

Again, the Bible is clear in that Christ is our righteousness. Christ is our holiness. Christ is our sanctification. His obedience unto holiness has become our obedience unto holiness. Jesus himself declared, "No one can come unto the Father but by me." His fellow-

ship and intimacy with the Father is our fellowship and intimacy with the Father.

The point is this: we have no holiness of our own to offer to God. We have no obedience to offer which He would delight to accept. It is only in the holiness of the Holy Son of God that we are now accepted into the beloved of God. And this is why we worship him.

We worship him because of:
the beauty of his holiness,
the graciousness of his holiness,
the immutability of his holiness,
the felicity of his holiness,
the holiness of his holiness.

In fact, the only appropriate response to the holiness of God is worship. The Psalmist in Psalm 99 realized this. Taking our cue from him, we should realize it too and sing:

Let them praise You, Great and Awesome
Let them lift high up Your Name
Let Your glory be exalted
Let Your glory be Your fame

Exalt the name of the Lord our God
Worship at His holy seat
Let the people bow and tremble
Holy, Holy is He
Holy, Holy is He

Let the nations come and worship
Let the earth quake as You said
Let the angels fall before You
And all creation bow its head

Exalt the name of the Lord our God
Worship at His holy seat
Let the people bow and tremble
Holy, Holy is He
Holy, Holy is He

Do You Know Him?

In the beginning I asked the question, “How do we know God?” We know God through the means by which he has delighted to reveal himself, first in nature and then in the Bible. However, perhaps a better question is “Do you want to know God?” If you want to know God, you can. God has delighted to make possible for us to know him – even to have a relationship with him. You not only can know that God exists (from creation) and know facts about the God who exists (from the Bible), but you can know

him intimately yourself and find the most rewarding and satisfying existence in him through Jesus Christ.

The Bible states plainly that in Christ:

...all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who were once alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him (Col. 1:19-23).

Christ is God providing the holiness necessary for reconciliation and relationship with him. Christ is God making himself known to creation so it can once again be at perfect peace with him.

God desires for you to know him even as he knows you. He desires that you would experience the holiness that is necessary for a relationship with him and the resulting happiness that comes only through embracing Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Everything that is holy is happy. Happiness is the result of holiness. Holiness comes by faith in Jesus Christ. So does true happiness. Do you want happiness? Do you want holiness? You will find it in Jesus Christ, the eternally holy and happy God.

About the Author

Anthony J. Carter is the lead pastor of East Point Church in East Point, GA. He is the author and/or editor of several books including *On Being Black and Reformed*, *Glory Road: The Journeys of 10 African-Americans into Reformed Christianity*, and *Blood Work: How the Blood of Christ Accomplishes our Salvation*. Besides his duties as a pastor, he is the husband of Adriane and the father of Anthony Jr., Rachel, Sarah, Siera, and Ana. They live in the Atlanta area where he enjoys studying, golf, and chillin' with the family.

For more information on East Point Church or to order more copies of this book visit online at:

www.epointchurch.org

Or write:

East Point Church
PO Box 90818
East Point, GA 30364

Other East Point Books:

What is the Gospel?

Wolves Among the Sheep

Fighting Sexual Temptation

Intimacy in Marriage

Eternal Life Together

