

“In the year of King Uzziah’s death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.’ And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke.” —Isaiah 6:1–4 (NASB)

Uzziah, king of Judah, died in 739 BC. He had been a generally good king—not as good as David, but also not like the wicked kings of the northern tribes of Israel. The inspired chronicler of Judah’s kings describes Uzziah’s ascension to the throne with this positive assessment:

And all the people of Judah took Uzziah, who *was* sixteen years old, and made him king in the place of his father Amaziah. He built Eloth and restored it to Judah after the king slept with his fathers. Uzziah was sixteen years old when he became king, and he reigned fifty-two years in Jerusalem; and his mother’s name was Jechiliah of Jerusalem. He did right in the sight of the LORD according to all that his father Amaziah had done. He continued to seek God in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding through the vision of God; and as long as he sought the LORD, God prospered him. (2 Chron 26:1–5)

Remarkably, Uzziah reigned for fifty-two years—a testimony to the favor he enjoyed from God. But near the end of his rule, Uzziah took a turn for the worse. He allowed his success to foster pride, which then led Uzziah to treat Yahweh as *profane* by disregarding His instructions for appropriate worship:

But when he became strong, his heart was so proud that he acted corruptly, and he was unfaithful to the LORD his God, for he entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense. Then Azariah the priest entered after him and with him eighty priests of the LORD, valiant men. They opposed Uzziah the king and said to him, ‘It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron who are consecrated to burn incense. Get out of the sanctuary, for you have been unfaithful and will have no honor from the LORD God.’ But Uzziah, with a censer in his hand for burning incense, was enraged; and while he was enraged with the priests, the leprosy broke out on his forehead before the priests in the house of the LORD, beside the altar of incense. Azariah the chief priest and all the priests looked at him, and behold, he *was* leprous on his forehead; and they hurried him out of there, and he himself also hastened to get out because the LORD had smitten him. King Uzziah was a leper to the day of his death; and he lived in a separate house, being a leper, for he was cut off from the house of the LORD. And Jotham his son *was* over the king’s house judging the people of the land. (2 Chron 26:16–21)

Uzziah’s death, and the circumstances that preceded it, weighed heavy on those who cared about the nation and its standing in the eyes of God. It certainly weighed heavy on Isaiah, the son of Amoz, a young man who was privileged with access to the king’s court. In distress over Uzziah’s death, Isaiah retreated to the temple for consolation—to the same place where God had rendered judgment on Uzziah’s trivialization of His character. There, Isaiah saw what Uzziah could not see because of his own arrogance—*Yahweh’s holiness* (Isa 6:1–4). In one of the most dramatic moments of human history, Isaiah “saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted” (v. 1), and he heard exalted angelic creatures call out, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory” (v. 3). The message and circumstances of this vision were exactly what was needed at that moment. For Isaiah it inspired *righteous fear*—a profound acknowledgement of the infinite distinction between God and His creation and an intense awareness of guilt and unworthiness due to the stain of personal and corporate sin. But it also inspired an irresistible attraction to that which was at the same time so frightening (vv. 5–8). That moment marked Isaiah’s call to be a prophet of Yahweh, “the Holy One of Israel”—a responsibility he bore from that day in 739 BC to at least 681 BC, and one for which he paid with his life. According to tradition, Isaiah was cut in two with a saw (cf. also Heb 11:37), undoubtedly for his role as the spokesman for the One who cannot tolerate the trivialization of His character.

The understanding Isaiah came to possess in the temple on that day is vital for every believer in any age. R. C. Sproul summarized the issue well when he wrote, “I am convinced that [the question of the holiness of God] is one of the most important ideas that a Christian can ever grapple with. It is basic to our whole understanding of God and of Christianity” (*The Holiness of God*, 24).

I. Definition of “Divine Holiness”

The holiness of God refers to His absolute transcendence and moral purity.

It is important to define God’s holiness according to how *He* has described it of Himself, and not according to our own experience of it. Why the distinction? It is with this perfection of holiness that we contemplate a quality which God can share with His creation. (Not all of God’s perfects are like that. Some, like *aseity*, are never shared by anything in creation—neither by men nor angels.) As those created in His *image* (Gen 1:26–27), mankind has been made to reflect God’s character in specific ways. The quality of moral purity—holiness—is one of those. And although the sin of Adam—our representative head—marred that image for all his descendants (Rom 5:12), the imitation of God’s moral purity is made possible now through *regeneration*, whereby God makes the sinner a new creation (2 Cor 5:17) and unites him with a different head, the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 5:17). Having experienced this regeneration, believers now “behold as in a mirror the glory of the Lord [Jesus],” and are “being transformed into the same image from glory to glory” (2 Cor 3:18).

However, our experience of holiness is far from complete. It is mixed with a myriad of other influences and continually changes until we reach glorification. Whatever holiness we do display is but a partial reflection of its perfection in God Himself. As the Puritan Thomas Brooks stated, “Holiness in angels and saints is but a quality, but in God it is His essence.” Furthermore, what we often define as “holiness” (moral purity) is actually a consequence to what it is in its ultimacy. The primary meaning of “holiness” is *absolute transcendence*, and this is something no saint will ever possess—either in this life or in the life to come.

Thus, we must put aside assumptions and look to God’s word to define for us what “holiness” truly is. The Old Testament is particularly helpful. The Hebrew verb for “to be holy” is *qādaš* (קָדַשׁ), which scholars suggest comes from the verb *qāṭ* (קָטַח), meaning “to cut.” When something is *cut*, a separation necessarily takes place. Consequently, the verb for “to be holy” (*qādaš*) has this fundamental idea of *separation*.

The Hebrew adjective for “holy,” *qādōš* (קָדוֹשׁ), is used to describe something as “holy, commanding respect, awesome” in contrast to what is common, or it is used to describe something as “holy, singled out, consecrated” in reference to people or things dedicated to God. It is not that such things necessarily possessed intrinsic moral purity to them. Rather, they were considered “holy” because God had *set them apart* for His purposes.

HOLINESS = SEPARATION

Thus, when defined biblically, the concept of “holiness” has to do with *separation or distinction*. God is not just *bigger* or *better* than men or angels. He is not the very best of the same category of things. He is of a totally category, utterly distinct from everything that has been made. He is an immeasurable “cut above” all else in existence. This concept leads to **two related emphases**:

1. **In the primary sense, God is *separate* in relation to *creation*.** His essence is utterly distinct from anything else that exists. He is, as Isaiah stated, “lofty and exalted” (Isa 6:1). It is this very “cut” between God and creation that establishes what theologians call the great *Creator-creation* distinction.

Therefore, God’s holiness is what repudiates all forms of ideological and practical *pantheism*, the belief that everything is part of an all-encompassing God—that the universe, or nature, and God are equivalent. His holiness is also what repudiates all forms of *panentheism*, the belief that God and creation share existence—that God is in the world and the world in God.

“When the Bible calls God holy, it means primarily that God is transcendentally separate. He is so far above and beyond us that He seems almost totally foreign to us.” —R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, 38

2. **In a secondary sense, the holiness of God describes His *moral purity*.** Because God is distinct and separate from creation, He is consequently untainted by any blemish that would render Him less than perfect. There is no hint of moral or rational defect in God's *existence, decrees, words, works, ends, or means*. In fact, it is utterly impossible for God to *think, intend, or commit* evil; nor can He act to make others to do the same (James 1:13).

It is this sense that we are thinking of when we speak of our duty to "pursue holiness" (*moral purity, separation from sin*), because it is this secondary sense—and not the first sense of transcendence—that can be reflected by us as God's image-bearers.

"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." —A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, 51

II. Biblical Testimony to God's Holiness

- A. **God's absolute distinction from creation.** God is holy in that He is essentially distinct from all that exists.
- Old Testament: Exodus 3:5; 15:11; Leviticus 22:32–33; 1 Samuel 2:2; Psalm 22:3; 47:8; 99:1–5; 111:9; Isaiah 6:1–4; 40:25; 52:10; 57:15; etc.
 - Note in particular the titles "Holy One" or "Holy One of Israel" used to describe God. The latter term is used 26 times in the book of Isaiah.
 - New Testament: Mark 1:23–24; Luke 1:46 – 49; Revelation 1:13–17; 4:8; 6:10; etc.
- B. **God's absolute separation from evil.** God is holy in that He is unpolluted by any form of moral impurity.
- Old Testament: Leviticus 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:26; Joshua 24:19; Psalm 15:1–2; 24:3–4; 89:35; Isaiah 5:16; 6:5; etc.
 - New Testament: Luke 5:4–8; Hebrews 7:26; 12:10; James 1:13; 1 Peter 1:14–16; 1 John 1:5; etc.
- C. **God's intolerance of erasing these distinctions.** God's holiness requires Him to condemn any effort to erase the Creator-creature divide or to impugn His character with moral impurity.
- Old Testament: Deuteronomy 4:23–24; 2 Samuel 6:6–7; Psalm 5:4–6; 7:11; 11:4–7; 45:6–7; Habakkuk 1:13; etc.
 - New Testament: Romans 1:18; Ephesians 5:6; Colossians 3:6; Hebrews 12:29; James 1:13; etc.

"Holiness is the most sparkling jewel of his crown; it is the name by which God is known."
—Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, 50

"Not to revere God as holy is not to revere God as God." —D. A. Carson, "1 Peter," 1018

III. What God's Holiness Demands from Us

Indeed, as Sproul stated, the question of God's holiness "is one of the most important ideas that a Christian can ever grapple with. It is basic to our whole understanding of God and of Christianity." The emphatic witness of Scripture to this perfection of God does not allow us to remain indifferent.

- A. **Extol the holiness of God.** The common response of the biblical writers to the reality of God's holiness is *praise*. Although holiness spells the worst terror for the unbeliever, it moves the believer to ever-growing adoration for this quality of God's essence. In a word, **God's holiness is pure *beauty***.
- 1 Chronicles 16:10; Psalm 5:7; 8:1; 29:2; 30:4; 99:9; Matthew 6:9; Revelation 15:4

Jonathan Edwards summarized well what is to be the thought of every believer: “God has appeared to me a glorious and lovely being chiefly on account of His holiness. The holiness of God has always appeared to me to be the most lovely of all His attributes.”

- B. **Abhor the trivialization of God.** To trivialize is to treat something as mundane. That God is holy means we can do no such thing with Him. Because He is “holy, holy, holy,” we should be exceedingly cautious whenever we invoke His name or speak of His character. Theology must always be *reverent*.
 - Exodus 20:7; Leviticus 19:12; Isaiah 66:2
- C. **Recognize the hideousness of your sin.** One cannot rightly study and accept the biblical teaching about God’s holiness and remain indifferent to the presence of personal sin. In fact, one of the best indications that we are growing in our understanding of this divine perfection is that our own sin is becoming increasingly ugly and intolerable to us. After all, it is to such ones that God *draws near*!
 - Isaiah 6:5; Luke 5:8; Isaiah 57:15; 66:2
- D. **Marvel at the miracle of the incarnation.** Although God is infinitely transcendent, He has revealed Himself also to be marvelously *immanent*. He is not merely “the Holy One” but “the Holy One *of Israel*,” the One who was not averse to identify with a specific people. Such immanence was demonstrated most vividly in the incarnation of the Son of God—in the One we know as “**Immanuel**”—God with us!
 - Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23; John 1:18
- E. **Rejoice for the achievement of the cross.** Because of Adam’s sin and our own, the chasm between God and us was so great that no hope for “life together” existed. But through the efficacious atonement accomplished by Immanuel on the cross, we now have peace and life with this wholly other God!
 - Isaiah 53:5; 2 Corinthians 5:21
- F. **Reflect the holiness of God.** As a result of God’s application of Immanuel’s finished cross-work to us, the ability to reflect His holiness is now a reality. Now, “to run hard after holiness is another way of running hard after God” (Kevin DeYoung, *The Hole in Our Holiness*, 123). It is a running hard after beauty.
 - Matthew 5:48; 1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1; 1 Thessalonians 4:7; 1 Peter 1:14–16

For Further Study

Memorize: 1 Samuel 2:2; 1 John 1:5

Recommended Reading: *The Holiness of God*, by R. C. Sproul

Sing: “Holy, Holy, Holy” (*Hymns of Grace* #48)

Pray: Adore God for His transcendence over all that He has made, and for His absolute moral purity. Confess how you have spoken of and related to Him in trivial ways. Pray that His name would be hallowed in your life and in the lives of your family and friends—whether through sanctification or salvation. Ask that God would do His work in you so that you might increasingly reflect His moral purity.

Discuss:

- 1) In your own words, define God’s “holiness.”
- 2) How does a better understanding of the Bible’s testimony about God’s holiness affect your worship?
- 3) Read 2 Samuel 6:1–11. What was Uzzah’s sin? Why did God render such judgment against him?
- 4) How does a better understanding of God’s holiness affect your fight with sin?
- 5) What is the difference between the believer’s “fear” and the unbeliever’s “fear” of God’s holiness?

Audio, video, and handouts for this session: gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: January 18 – Omnipotence