



Lesson 2 – God Is Holy

If we had to pick one attribute of God to set above the rest, which one should we pick? In some ways you can't even make a choice like that: God's attributes can't be split apart and stacked against each other. Theologians talk about the unity of God: God is all of His attributes all of the time. But if we were to ask which attribute is emphasized the most, we do see in Scripture that there is one description that rises in importance: His holiness.

When angelic powers are surrounding the brilliantly glorious throne of God, there is one word we hear repeated over and over: Holy! Holy! Holy! (Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8). This apparently made an impact on Isaiah, because throughout his book he frequently refers to God as "the Holy One." The Spirit of God is called the Holy Spirit. Other passages similarly highlight the importance of God's holiness (Leviticus 11:44; Exodus 15:11; Psalm 99:9; Isaiah 57:15). The Lord's Prayer begins with a request that God's name be "hallowed," or set apart as holy (Matthew 6:9). Many today don't like the thought that God is holy, but Scripture is clear on the matter. If we want to know God, we must come to Him recognizing that He is a holy God.

Why do many people resist the idea that God is holy?

How would our culture look different if we took more seriously the holiness of God?

How would our lives look different if we took more seriously the holiness of God?

What Does It Mean to Be Holy?

Before we can truly understand what it means that God is holy, we need to understand what holiness is. When we read our Old Testament, we find that God is considered holy, but so are people, dishes, and even certain places. The Sabbath is holy. The ground on which Moses stands while speaking to the burning bush is holy. Lots of things are holy, so we need a flexible definition of the word "holy." We need a definition that covers the essence of who God is, but can also be used for tongs and a plot of ground. So what exactly does "holy" mean?

What does it mean if a dish, a day of the week, or a piece of land is holy?

Although there is some debate over this word, the idea that best sums up the word “holy” is “set apart.” Normally this meant that something had been set apart specifically for use in the worship of a god/the God. Lots of people use dishes, but certain dishes are set apart to be used specifically for the worship of the deity; these dishes would then be holy. Certain people were set apart to serve the deity as priests, so these men were holy. The Sabbath was a day of the week that belonged to God, therefore it was set apart as special – it was holy.

If this is the case, what does it mean when the New Testament says that we are holy?

If the word holy means separate, what does it mean that God is holy? Dishes, days of the week, land, and even people can be dedicated to God, they can be holy. But what then does it mean that God Himself is holy? God’s holiness is seen in two distinct ways, which we will now study.

In what ways is God holy?

God’s Holiness

The nations around Israel talked about places, people, and things being holy – set apart for special use by their god/gods. While Israel also described places, people, and things as holy, they did something unique – they described their God as holy. If holiness means set apart, in what ways is God set apart? First, God is set apart from His creation because He is in a category all by Himself, this emphasizes His majesty. Second, God is set apart from all that is wicked and defiling, this emphasizes His purity.

God’s Holiness Means that He Is Separate from All Creation – He Is Majestic

God is separate from all that exists in the sense that He is far greater than everything else. When we compare God with what exists, God is more than just better; He is in an entirely different category. We might say there are two types of things that exist in the Universe: (1) the Creator and (2) everything He created.

Why does it matter that we see God as being in a class totally of His own? What happens if we don’t clearly distinguish between God and all He created?

Several passages show us that God’s holiness means that He is majestic above all else – in a class by Himself. The first example is Isaiah 6:3 “And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: The whole earth is full of his glory.” Here we see the Seraphim praising God for His holiness, and connecting holiness to God’s glory in all the earth. In a similar passage in Revelation 4:8 we see those who are praising God cry out “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty.” Again, God’s holiness and His unmatched power are closely connected.

In the first lengthy hymn of praise in the Bible, Moses leads the Israelites in praising God after He delivered them from Egypt (Exodus 15:1-19). About halfway through, the song declares this about God: “Who is like unto thee, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like thee, glorious in holiness, Fearful in praises, doing wonders?” (15:11) God’s power in overcoming the most powerful nation in the world at that time (and embarrassing their gods in the process) demonstrated that He was glorious, majestic, and powerful beyond anything else in creation. He alone was glorious in holiness. (See also 1 Samuel 2:2; 1 Chronicles 16:29; Isaiah 4:25)

In what other ways does God demonstrate His majestic power above everything else that exists?

The beginning of Isaiah 57:15 also makes this point “For thus saith the high and lofty One That inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, With him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, To revive the spirit of the humble, And to revive the heart of the contrite ones.” Here God’s holiness is again connected to the fact that He is transcendent – high above all else in the creation.

What surprising twist does this verse include? Why do you think it is that a high and holy God deals with those who are humble and contrite?

God’s Holiness Means that He Is Separate from All Corruption – He Is Pure

When people hear that God is holy, they normally think that means He is separate from everything evil, defiling, or wicked. As we’ve seen, God’s holiness means more than that, but it doesn’t mean less. Several important passages tie God’s holiness to His complete separation from sin. In Habakkuk 1:13, the prophet is frustrated by the corruption he sees around him. He pleads with God to do something by stating “Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity.” When God’s people sin, they violate the holiness of God (Isaiah 1:4; Jeremiah 51:5). Jesus’ sinlessness is described in terms of holiness and justice (Acts 3:13-14) and the sin of Christians violates God’s holiness (1 Corinthians 3:17; Ephesians 4:24). God is totally and completely separate from sin, this makes Him holy and means that He will not tolerate or overlook wickedness.

Why does our culture ignore the purity of God? What result will there be when God’s absolute perfect character is downplayed or ignored?

The Impact of God’s Holiness

So far, we have seen that God is completely holy: set apart from creation in His transcendence and set apart from sin in His purity. But what difference does that make? How does the holiness of God impact God’s behavior, and how should it impact our thinking and behavior?

God’s Holiness Means He Alone Should be Worshipped

Because God is separate from all creation, He and He alone should be worshipped. Isaiah 6:3 connects the holiness of God with glory of God, and elsewhere in Isaiah God warns that He will not share His glory with another (Isaiah 42:8; 48:11). God’s majestic holiness requires that we rid ourselves of all other gods that would rival our affection for Him (Exodus 20:2-3; Deuteronomy 5:6-7). While in the Old Testament this warning forbid bowing down to statues, today it means that God alone must have first place in our lives. A covetous desire for something other than God can be seen as an idolatrous desire to replace God with something in the creation (Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 3:5). God and God alone must be worshipped as supreme because He alone is transcendent above all and worthy of glory.

How will a great view of God’s majestic holiness inspire worship?

What does it look like to worship the creation in today’s American culture, where people no longer bow down to little figurines?

God's Holiness Requires Him to Judge Sin

Since God is separate from all that is evil, He cannot tolerate evil and must address it. As we saw earlier, Habakkuk cries out to God that He is holy and cannot look upon sin (Habakkuk 1:13), asking God to do something about the rampant wickedness Habakkuk sees around Him. Paul said that God in His wisdom planned out the gospel so that God would be both "just" and "the justifier" of the one who believes in Jesus (Romans 3:25-26). Those in Revelation who have suffered for the sake of Christ ask how long before the holy and true God judges the wicked. The response that comes back to them is essentially, "Not much longer" (Revelation 6:9-12).

God will judge sin. Abraham said it well when he asked, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25). Yes, in due time God will do right, and all wickedness will be dealt with (cf Revelation 20:11-15). This should give us hope when people wrong us, but it should also cause us to fear when we sin, knowing that our infinitely holy God takes sin deadly seriously. Above all, this should motivate us to run to Christ, who took the punishment for our sins so that God's righteous wrath does not fall on us (Romans 3:23-26; 2 Corinthians 5:21). All sin will be judged, and either we will face that judgment or Christ will face it on our behalf.

Why do you think so many today have such a careless attitude about God's holiness? Why do they take their sin so lightly when God takes it so seriously?

How can we correct such wrong thinking in our own minds?

God's Holiness Requires Our Holiness

When we see the holiness of God for what it is and come to understand who God is, we are then most clearly able to see ourselves for who we really are. Many people think they are doing alright until they are put up against the brilliant holiness of God. Isaiah was given a view of the holiness of God, and his response was to confess his own and the sin of those around him (Isaiah 6:5-7). Now, Isaiah was serving in the temple while this happened, and probably looked like a faithful priest serving His God! But when He saw God for who God really was, for the first time he saw himself as he truly was.

We will not receive a powerful vision of God before our death or Christ's return like Isaiah did, so how can we have a view of God's holiness that gives us a right understanding of who we are?

God has said, "Be ye holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 19:2; 1 Peter 1:16). His character sets the standard for us, and He demands our own growth in holiness. As we read and study God's Word, we should be coming to a greater understanding of the power and majesty of God and the purity of God. Such an understanding should humble us and motivate us to live a holy life as we follow this great and pure God. In our strength, we are unable to fulfill this standard, but with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can come to reflect, even if imperfectly, the powerful holiness of God to a corrupt and indifferent world.

What difference can believers make as they live holy lives in the public sphere?

How can we who are struggling to be holy address the sin in their lives and come to be more holy?