
The Call to Holiness

The Holiness of God

Various Passages

ONLY THE PEOPLE of Israel had light where they dwelt.

And there it was that Moses, his hair like smoke on a mountain, took a stand before the whole congregation and spoke:

“Listen to me and believe what I say,” he said. “I have seen the holiness of God.”

In all Israel, no one uttered a word. Too much had happened since this man had arrived.

Moses said: “He called to me from a flame of fire in the midst of a bush. I saw the bush burning on the side of a mountain, yet it was not consumed; so I went to look, and as I did the voice of God said, Moses! Moses!

“I said, ‘Here I am.’

“God said, Remove your shoes, for the place where you stand is holy ground, and I am the God of your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob.

“I hid my face, afraid to look at the living God.

“But God said, I have seen the affliction of my people, and I am coming to bring them from bondage into a land flowing with milk and honey—the land I promised your fathers long ago.

“Then God commanded me to carry his word to Pharaoh and to you. He said that I should lead you out of Egypt.

“But I said, ‘Who am I to do such a thing?’

“God said, I will be with you, and you shall know my name and use it.

“In the midst of the flame of fire, then, the voice of God proclaimed: I AM WHO I AM! Say to Israel that I AM—YAHWEH, the Lord, the God of your fathers—has sent me to you.”¹

II The Holiness of God

A. Introduction

B. In the Old Testament

C. In the New Testament

D. As God’s Character

A. Introduction: *So—did you get out of your goldfish bowl?* This morning let me start by summarizing what we considered last week. First, we are holy in that we, as believers, are separated from the world and sanctified to God’s service. This is true for all of us.

Second, we can only live in the reality of our holiness as we depend on the Holy Spirit to empower us to walk the walk as well as talk the talk. Yes, He lives it through us and we can’t be who we are called to be out of our own strength.

Nevertheless third, the walk involves discipline and work on our part. And that work is grounded in growing closer in our fellowship to God. As we walk closer with Him we will grow in the manifestation of holiness and godliness. And the practical aspect of that work is spending time in the word, not just reading, but studying and meditating; in prayer, not just

¹ Wangerin Jr., Walter, *The Book of God*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 96.

cursory, but ongoing conversations with God; and in fellowship, not just showing up for services, but spending time with others, encouraging one another in our moving towards God.

Remember, we are called to be holy. And the fact God is holy is the basis for His requiring us to be holy.

“... but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”” (1 Peter 1:15–16 ESV).

This means that God Himself becomes the example of holiness we need to consider in order to understand who we are to be. Jerry Bridges states:

“ God has called every Christian to a holy life. There are no exceptions to this call. It is not a call only to pastors, missionaries, and a few dedicated Sunday school teachers. Every Christian of every nation, whether rich or poor, learned or unlearned, influential or totally unknown, is called to be holy. The Christian plumber and the Christian banker, the unsung homemaker and the powerful head of state are all alike called to be holy.

This call to a holy life is based on the fact that God Himself is holy. Because God is holy, He requires that we be holy. Many Christians have what we might call a “cultural holiness.” They adapt to the character and behavior pattern of Christians around them. As the Christian culture around them is more or less holy, so these Christians are more or less holy. But God has not called us to be like those around us. He has called us to be like Himself. Holiness is nothing less than conformity to the character of God.”²

And so to have a better understanding of holiness, we need to look at the holiness of God. Lewis Sperry Chafer said of God’s holiness.

*“ The holiness of God is **active**. As a primary motive, it incites all that He does; therefore He is righteous in His ways. Though infinitely holy, He, nevertheless, maintains a relation to fallen creatures; not a quiescent aloofness from them, but a vital, pulsating nearness. His is not a holiness which is engendered by a sustained effort nor preserved by segregation from other beings. The holiness of God is intrinsic, uncreated, and untarnishable; it is observable in every divine attitude and action. It embraces not only His devotion to that which is good, but is also the very basis and force of His hatred of that which is evil. Thus there is in divine holiness the capacity for reaction toward others which is both positive and negative.”³*

B. As Pictured in the Old Testament: God’s holiness is beyond our ability to totally comprehend, as are all His attributes. But let’s look at some verses to see examples of God’s holiness contrasted with the world’s unrighteousness.

“ Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?

“Behold, God puts no trust in his holy ones, and the heavens are not pure in his sight;

Behold, even the moon is not bright, and the stars are not pure in his eyes; how much less man, who is a maggot, and the son of man, who is a worm!”

Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.

² Bridges, Jerry, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, NavPress, Carol Stream, IL, 2014, p. 29-30.

³ Chafer, Lewis Sperry, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, “Biblical Theism: The Attributes of God,” Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, TX, Jan, 1939, Vol. 96, p.8

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”” (Exodus 15:11; Job 15:15; 25:5–6; Psalms 22:3; Proverbs 9:10; Isaiah 6:3 ESV)

We can see that God’s holiness uniquely sets Him above and apart from His creation, which parenthetically argues against the pantheistic ideal that God is in everything. If we have a problem understanding God’s holiness, we shouldn’t be surprised. Tozer put it this way:

“Holiness means purity, but “purity” doesn’t describe it well enough. Purity merely means that it is unmixed, with nothing else in it. But that isn’t enough. We talk of moral excellency, but that isn’t adequate. To be morally excellent is to exceed someone else in moral Character. But when we say that God is morally excellent, who is it that He exceeds? The angels, the seraphim? Surely He does—but that still isn’t enough. We mean rectitude; we mean honor; we mean truth and righteousness; we mean all of these—uncreated and eternal.

God is not now any holier than He ever was. For He, being unchanging and unchangeable, can never become holier than He is. And He never was holier than He is, and He’ll never be any holier than now. His moral excellence implies self-existence, for He did not get His holiness from anyone nor from anywhere. He did not go off into some vast, infinitely distant realm and there absorb His holiness; He is Himself the Holiness. He is the All-Holy, the Holy One; He is holiness itself, beyond the power of thought to grasp or of word to express, beyond the power of all praise.”⁴

It was based on God’s holiness Moses told Israel and, by extension, us:

“You shall diligently keep the commandments of the LORD your God, and his testimonies and his statutes, which he has commanded you. And you shall do what is right and good in the sight of the LORD, that it may go well with you, ...

“For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth” (Deuteronomy 6:17–18, 7:6 ESV).

Moses stated that Israel was a holy people, not “You need to become holy.” They were holy.

C. As Pictured in the New Testament: The holiness of God is just as clear in the New Testament as in the Old because God is unchanging and unchangeable. This is why Peter reiterated Leviticus. It is the Spirit’s way of reminding us that God never changes. And this is part of the message we are to proclaim when we disseminate the Gospel.

“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5).

Jesus pointed to God’s holiness when He noted:

“And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one” (John 17:11 ESV).

⁴ Tozer, A. W., The Attributes of God, Vol. 1, Wing Spread Publishers, Camp Hill, PN, 2003. P. 159-160

In this passage holiness is most likely related to God's moral purity, His "blamelessness." It is this purity, total righteousness, that necessitated the cross. Without God providing the gift of righteousness, holiness, we would have no way to come into His presence. Christ, having paid the price for our sins returned to God's presence. The rejection of that payment requires God's judgment.

Paul noted this when he stated:

“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality” (1 Corinthians 6:9 ESV).

The other aspect of Christ's referring to the Father as holy may relate to God's majesty, His "awefulness" This aspect is the one that appears to have been lost to the Church in general. Tozer notes:

*“In the New Testament, we have a Greek word about God being holy.... I notice that the definition of that Greek word is “Awful [full of awe] Thing.” Now think of that. **The Awful Thing**—that's one meaning of the word holy—the Holy One!”⁵*

This is emphasized most clearly when we move into Revelation and God's final judgment.

“And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” (Revelation 4:8 ESV).

“Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed” (Revelation 15:4)

It is only by drawing closer to God, that is, understanding Him fully, both individually and corporately that we can grow in our understanding of His awfulness, holiness, and His majesty. And it is through this growth that we can hope to see a restoration of a lived out holiness both individually and in the body. So where in the New Testament do we see this aspect of God's holiness most clearly shown?

“And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

“Therefore they are before the throne of God,

⁵ Ibid., p. 163.

***and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence”
(Revelation 7:11–15 ESV).***

This is the Holy God who calls us to be holy. Pretty overwhelming, isn't it? And so the focus of Scripture both Old and New is, because God is holy the human race was cut off from Him as a consequence of the Fall.

***“ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellences of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy”
(1 Peter 2:9–10 ESV).***

But though the cross we are restored to the relationship we were created to have. And as part of that restoration we are holy and are called at the same time to be holy. Let me repeat again, God calls us to be Holy. And if God calls us to be holy, then it is possible to be holy.

D. As God's Character: But let's stop for a moment. If we're considering God's holiness, then we need recognize a basic fact. There are things God can't do. And for our consideration, the thing He can't do is violate His own character. J. I. Packer points out:

God's character does not change. Strain, or shock, or a lobotomy, can alter the character of a person, but nothing can alter the character of God. In the course of human life, tastes and outlook and temper may change radically: a kind, equable person may turn bitter and crotchety; a person of good will may grow cynical and callous. But nothing of this sort happens to the Creator. He never becomes less truthful, or merciful, or just, or good than he used to be. The character of God is today, and always will be, exactly what it was in Bible times.”⁶

God is holy and cannot act in a way which is inconsistent with His holiness. Yes, it is God's desire that ...

“ ... all people ... be saved and ... come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4 ESV).

Nevertheless the ...

“... wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23 ESV).

The point is, God can't allow all into Heaven. He can't weigh a person's "good" deeds against their "bad." He is holy. He is incapable of accepting anything short of perfection. This is why the incarnation was absolutely necessary and ...

“ ... the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23 ESV).

God's holiness demands that He judge the lost, even though He desires that all be saved.

⁶ Packer, J. I., Knowing God, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1993, p. 77-78.

“Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live” (Ezekiel 18:31–32 ESV).

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16 ESV).

God’s character is holy. Therefore He must act in a way that is consistent with His character.

***“the LORD ... comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness,
and the peoples in his faithfulness” (Psalm 96:13 ESV).***

Conclusion: So what can we take from the holiness of God? It is an aspect of His character. He can’t compromise His character. When we speak of God’s holiness, we are speaking of His “*awefulness*,” His majesty.

When we speak of God’s holiness, we are speaking of His separateness from His creation and His authority over it.

And when we speak of God’s holiness we are also speaking of it as it relates to moral purity. And so, the question is when God calls us to holiness, what is His expectation for us? What does it mean for us to be holy.

“Strive ... for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14 ESV).

Well before trying to answer that let me suggest that over the coming week, again ask God to show Himself to you. Meditate on His holiness. Ask Him who He desires you to be.

But before we try to answer this question, next week I want to examine the holiness of Christ because He is always the example God provides as the goal towards which, in dependency on The Spirit, we strive.

“Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God” (Hebrews 12:12–15 ESV).

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A. Introduction:

(1 Peter 1:15–16)

B. As Pictured in the Old Testament:

(Exodus 15:11; Job 15:15; 25:5–6; Psalms 22:3; Proverbs 9:10; Isaiah 6:3; Deut. 6:17–18, 7:6)

C. As Pictured in the New Testament:

(1 John 1:5; John 17:11; 1 Corinthians 6:9; Revelation 4:8, 15:4, 7:11–15; 1 Peter 2:9–10)

D. As God's Character:

(1 Timothy 2:4; Romans 6:23a, Romans 6:23b; Ezekiel 18:31–32; John 3:16; Psalm 96:13;

Conclusion:

(Hebrews 12:14, 12:12–15)

Recommended Reading: Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, NavPress
A. W. Tozer, *The Attributes of God*, Wing Spread Publishers
J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, InterVarsity Press