

From Acorn to Oak
Who is God, and what is he like? Part 10: Holy, holy, holy
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You're having a conversation with your next door neighbor over the backyard fence. The conversation turns to religion, and he asks, "Why should I believe in Jesus Christ? I'm perfectly happy as I am; I'm doing just fine without him." What do you say?

Recalling your sound, historic, Christian, systematic theology, well established on the Bible, you know that as a sinner, living and working in a world of other sinners, he is not always happy. You could try, as many do, to say that as happy as he thinks he is now, he'd be a lot happier with Christ. Or, you could try the approach of others that by believing in Jesus he'll find his greatest fulfillment. You could also try the orientation of still others by saying that God loves him, so he ought to love Jesus back. Many similar well-meaning, but misguided, pleas to human felt needs attempt to convince people of their unfelt need to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

The chief flaw in these approaches is making the starting point the human being him or herself. It is only when we help people understand who God is and what he is like that they can, with the Holy Spirit's help (1 Corinthians 12:3), comprehend the necessity of Jesus Christ.

Consider an analogy. Educators distinguish between two standards of judgment in evaluation: a criterion reference and a norm reference.

Simply stated a criterion reference is an exact amount and type of information and/or skill development that is expected. If the student doesn't supply precisely what is required on a paper or an exam, he or she will not receive a grade of A and may even fail.

A norm reference takes into account what other students have done; it's "grading on the curve." Many people believe God will treat them on the basis of a norm reference. They look around at others and say, "I'm not so bad. I'm a whole lot better than ole Joe and most if not all others." The problem is that God doesn't grade on the curve; he has a criterion, and he has given it to us in his Word, which clearly reveals that...

God is holy.

We read in the Bible that "God is love." (1 John 4:8) This verse means that the essence of God's being is love; i.e., love characterizes who he is. Nevertheless, his love issues forth in other attributes as well.

Further, the statement, "God is love," cannot be properly interpreted as a chiasmus, a popular grammatical and rhetorical verbal pattern, where the second half of an expression, when reversed, is also usually true or makes a point. An old example is the

statement that in the prophetic part of ministry, “we need to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” Nowhere does the Bible teach, in this passage or anywhere else, that love is God; that would be to make a false god out of love. We’ll undertake a fuller study of God’s love in an upcoming section. For now, to most fully appreciate and understand his love, we must consider a related characteristic: his holiness.

As our society grows more egalitarian it has become vogue among many, but thankfully not all, to treat everyone as a peer, for example children calling elders and authority figures by their first names. Therefore, it is not surprising that it has become fashionable even to refer to God in too familiar, even “palsy-walsy,” terms. Many people, disregarding the third commandment, pepper their emotional outbursts by repeatedly exclaiming, “Oh God!” Others believe that God has a “dark side,” is not totally good, and winks at sin, remembering previous periods when he “sowed his own wild oats.” When we turn to his revelation of himself in his Word though, we see a much different disclosure of who God is and what he is like.

While the Bible does say that God related to Abraham and Moses as a friend (e.g., Exodus 33:11; Isaiah 41:8; James 2:23), and Jesus referred to his disciples, and by extension us, as his friends (John 15:13-17), this friendship is not one of equals and should not be treated in a cavalier manner. Jesus said, “You are my friends if you do what I command.” His disciples worshiped him. (Matthew 28:9) Clearly, while one of us and always accessible, he is not a peer; while 100% human, he is also 100% divine, the Son of God and our Lord as well as our Savior.

God is holy, a concept that has been ignored in recent times and is unheard of by many. His holiness involves both a definite distinction from all other aspects of his creation (e.g., Hosea 11:9) and separation from all that is evil. (Isaiah 6:1-8) This understanding links with his transcendence (one of his incommunicable characteristics, which we considered earlier in this series); he cannot be confused with the world or any parts of it, contrary to what is taught in Eastern religions and the New Age religion which is so popular. Holiness involves not being common, separate from that which is widespread, shared by, and characteristic of all others.

While the principal aspect of holiness is separation from that which is evil, another meaning of holiness involves moral excellence and purity as well as ethical perfection. This is a characteristic, or an attribute, of God, and he requires it of those whom he has called and who would have fellowship with him. “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.” (Leviticus 19:2)

Very importantly, God is not only holy, but holy, holy, holy, as Isaiah writes (6:3; also Revelation 4:8). This aspect of God’s holiness is significant, and it means most holy, expressing the superlative in the only way possible in the Hebrew language, i.e., by repeating the word three times.

Theologian R. C. Sproul has observed that of all God’s attributes, the only one that is repeated three times is God’s holiness. We don’t see anywhere in the Bible where God is

referred to as “love, love, love” or “all knowing, all knowing, all knowing,” though he truly is most loving and all knowing. Even though in English we have the means of expressing the superlative grammatically, by adding such adjectives as “most” or “greatest,” the threefold repetition is still helpful in contemplating God, for example when coming into his presence to pray.

As God’s people have done for thousands of years, a very meaningful way to begin a time of prayer is to contemplate God and the words we’re saying to him, especially since he doesn’t appreciate or value thoughtless babble. (Matthew 6:6-9) In so doing, I find it helpful to begin by expressing praise and adoration in such a manner as this: “Holy, holy, holy Father, who are all-loving, and the Giver of every good and perfect gift, how great you are and greatly to be praised!” Addressing him as “holy, holy, holy,” instead of “most holy” (at least at the beginning, and occasionally elsewhere in my prayer) helps me remember what his holiness means and focus on the significance of what I’m saying and to communicate with God with a clearer awareness, comprehension, and appreciation of who he is, what he is like, and how I properly engage in conversation with him. (It is certainly acceptable to use the term “most holy,” and I do, but repeating “holy, holy, holy” as the Israelites did, does help in these ways.)

Other Aspects of God’s Holiness

God abhors evil, which he is in the process of destroying. This reality presents a problem for us, since “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) Indeed, sin and its effects constitute a key aspect of the human condition in this age following Adam and Eve’s disobedience. God will not compromise his integrity. Neither will he corrupt his dwelling place by coexisting and having fellowship with those who sin and do what is evil. Hence no human being is fit for his fellowship; rather we rate eternal separation from God who is holy, holy, holy, a fearsome thought which lies at the heart of the Bible’s repeated admonitions regarding the fear of God.

On Sunday mornings we see evidence of the cavalier view of God that exists in our society and even in the church in many places. Many people enter the sanctuary like they would any other place, engaging in banter with friends and, if they think of God’s presence at all, behave as though he ought to be glad they showed up! Many worship services don’t even have a prayer of confession at all, much less at the beginning of the service where the people simply start doing their thing without thought as to into Whose presence they just came and Whom they are addressing. (It should go without saying that such fellowship and joy does characterize that special fellowship Christians have in the Holy Spirit, referred to in the Bible as *koinoia*, and it is typical of the life of the church; but when it comes to approaching God who is holy, holy, holy in his sanctuary, it is important to do so with more respect than is often observed and to engage in the pleasant interactions with fellow church members before and especially after worship.)

Yet he loves us. He is thus unwilling to destroy us as we deserve, but to preserve his holiness he initiated his plan in Christ whereby those who believe in Jesus will be credited with his righteousness and become holy to God and fit for his fellowship. In the

Bible all believers are therefore called saints (Acts 9:13; Romans 1:7; Philippians 1:1), the root word for which in New Testament Greek is the same as the word for holy.

We are set apart for God's fellowship and service. The Holy Spirit works in our hearts and minds to sanctify us (Romans 8; Galatians 5:16-26), the root word for which is also the one for holy. Sanctification involves a progressive, though not always smooth or even, growth toward Christlikeness throughout our lives here on earth and culminating in perfection in paradise. We'll discuss this subject further in a later chapter.

More Benefits for Us

The more we exist and grow in this holy state in relationship with God the more we stand in awe of what he has done for us! Through paramount personal pain to himself, he has preserved us from destruction and given us a life-shaping calling.

Set apart for fellowship and service for God who is holy, holy, holy, we are connected with him and his unlimited blessings. "For this is what the high and lofty One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: 'I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.'" (Isaiah 57:15) He also employs us in providing such renewal.

Many people, who are disappointed because God did or allowed something they don't like, or didn't do something they wanted, become angry at God. His Word on the other hand says that we should be thankful in all things. (Philippians 4:6) While God did permit Jeremiah to vent his anger toward God, after the prophet finished getting off his chest what he had been harboring in his heart, God said in effect, "Now, remember who you are talking to and repent; then I'll restore you." (Jeremiah 15:15-20) God does want us to communicate with him honestly, but respectfully, including confessing our sin when we do what is wrong, including forgetting that he is Most Holy and treating him as a common buddy.

Since God is holy, and requires holiness, morality and decency will exist. Corruption and evil will not be everywhere prevalent. Further, we can look forward to an eternal existence without evil and the pain it produces. (Revelation 21-22)

So what do you tell your neighbor who has asked, "Why do I need Jesus?" Your initial reply can be four words: because God is holy.

Then explain that reality a bit. He is not only holy; he is holy, holy, holy (or Most Holy)! At the same time, include in the explanation that Jesus is God's supreme expression of his grace, his steadfast love, which he has given at great cost to himself, in the most wonderful demonstration of love ever, and Jesus is the only way God has chosen to permit access to himself and to the eternal life in his service and glorious presence.