

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

The Holiness of God Lesson #5

In the Old Testament the holiness of God primarily focuses on what theologians like to call God's "majestic holiness." God's majestic holiness is the absolute, unapproachable, holiness of God, which causes men to fall down in utter despair and hopelessness. In the New Testament the emphasis changes to the "ethical holiness" of God. Ethical holiness is holiness to be attained, imputed, strived for, or maintained in the life of the believer. While there are exceptions in both testaments, together we get a good picture of God's holiness. In fact, we it might be summed up in the saying, "be holy, for I am holy." The New Testament focuses on "being holy" and the Old Testament on the fact of God's absolute holiness. In this study we will look at the attribute of God's holiness and consider some of the ways God's holiness applies to us as believers in Jesus Christ.

I. THE DEFINITION OF GOD'S HOLINESS

A. Millard Erickson notes,

"There are two basic aspects to God's Holiness. The first is His uniqueness. . . He is totally separate from all of creation. . . The other aspect of God's holiness is His absolute purity or goodness. This means He is untouched or unstained by evil in the world."¹

B. Thomas Watson has said,

"God's holiness consists in His perfect love of righteousness, and abhorrence of evil."²

C. Louis Berkhof defines holiness saying,

"It is not correct to think of holiness primarily as a moral or religious quality, as is generally done. Its fundamental idea is that of a *position* or *relationship* existing between God and some person or thing."³

D. God is perfectly holy, and believers are to strive to be like God. John Sheffield defines the kind of holiness believers are to reflect in their pursuit of godliness saying,

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, pg. 284-285.

² Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, pg. 83.

³ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pg. 73.

“True holiness is that inward, thorough, and real change, wrought in the whole man of a formerly vile sinner by the Spirit of God, whereby his heart is purged from the love, and his life from the dominion and practice, of former sins, and whereby he is in heart and life carried out after every good.”⁴

E. *Great Doctrines of the Bible* notes,

“John 3:16—“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son,” etc. Here God’s holiness is seen in that He loves righteousness in the life of His children to such a degree that He gave His only begotten Son to secure it.”⁵

II. THOUGHTS TO PONDER ABOUT GOD’S HOLINESS

A. *The New Bible Dictionary* says,

“Since holiness embraces every distinctive attribute of the Godhead, it may be conceived of as the outshining of all that God is. As the sun’s rays, combining all the colors of the spectrum, come together in the sun’s shining and blend into light, so in his self-manifestation all the attributes of God come together and blend into holiness.”⁶ (composite holiness)

B. Thomas Watson says,

“The saint's holiness is like gold in the ore, imperfect; their humility is stained with pride; he that has most faith needs pray, "Lord, help my unbelief:" but the holiness of God is pure, like wine from the grape; it has not the least dash of tincture of impurity mixed with it.”⁷ (partial vs. complete holiness)

C. Thomas Watson also notes,

“Holiness is the only thing that distinguishes us from the reprobate part of the world. . . As a nobleman is distinguished from another by a silver star; as a virtuous woman is distinguished from a harlot by her chastity; so holiness distinguishes between the two seeds. All that are of God have Christ for their Captain, and holiness is the white color they wear.”⁸

⁴ James Nichols, *Puritan Sermons*, vol. 5 sermon by John Sheffield “What is Holiness,” (Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, Publishers, 1981), 427.

⁵ William Evans and S. Maxwell Coder, *The Great Doctrines of the Bible*, Enl. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 40.

⁶ New Bible Dictionary, Logos Bible Software.

⁷ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, 87.

⁸ Ibid.

D. A. W. Tozer comments,

“Neither the writer nor the reader of these words is qualified to appreciate the holiness of God. Quite literally a new channel must be cut through the desert of our minds to allow the sweet waters of truth that will heal our great sickness to flow in. We cannot grasp the true meaning of the divine holiness by thinking of someone or something very pure and then raising the concept to the highest degree we are capable of. God's holiness is not simply the best we know infinitely bettered. We know nothing like the divine holiness. It stands apart, unique, unapproachable, incomprehensible, and unattainable. The natural man is blind to it. He may fear God's power and admire His wisdom, but His holiness he cannot even imagine.”⁹

III. SCRIPTURAL SUPPORT FOR THE HOLINESS OF GOD

A. **Majestic Holiness** (Primarily emphasized in the Old Testament)

1. Exod. 15:11 -- “Who is like You among the gods, O Lord? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, Awesome in praises, working wonders?”
2. I Sam. 2:2 -- “There is no one holy like the Lord, Indeed, there is no one besides You, Nor is there any rock like our God.
3. Isa. 6:1-5 -- “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. 2 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. 3 And one called out to another and said, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory.” 4 And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. 5 Then I said, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.”
4. Isa. 57:15 – “For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, “I dwell on a high and holy place, And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit In order to revive the spirit of the lowly And to revive the heart of the contrite.”

B. **Ethical Holiness** (Primarily emphasized in the New Testament)

1. Lev. 11:44-45 – “For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. And you shall not make yourselves unclean with any of the swarming things that swarm on the earth. 45 ‘For I

⁹ A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, pg. 104.

am the Lord who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God; thus you shall be holy, for I am holy.’ ”

2. I Pet. 1:14-16 – “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, 15 but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; 16 because it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”
3. Matt. 5:48 -- “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”
4. Heb. 12:10-14 – “For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. 11 All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. 12 Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, 13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. 14 Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.”
5. Rev. 15:2-4 – “And I saw something like a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, holding harps of God. 3 And they sang the song of Moses, the bond-servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, “Great and marvelous are Your works, O Lord God, the Almighty; Righteous and true are Your ways, King of the nations! 4 “Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy; For all the nations will come and worship before You, For Your righteous acts have been revealed.”

IV. PARADOX OF GOD'S HOLINESS

- A. If God is holy, totally separate from evil, and everywhere present, how can He tolerate to be in the presence of sinful men and demons?
- B. If there is no one who is holy (Rom. 3:10ff) and without holiness no one will see God (Heb. 12:14), how is anyone saved?

V. APPLICATION OF THE HOLINESS OF GOD

- A. *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* notes that sanctification is both God's work and the believers work,

“We are sanctified by God the Father (Jude 1), God the Son (Heb. 2:11), and God the Holy Spirit (2 Thess. 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:2). Perfect holiness is God’s command (1 Thess. 4:7) and purpose. As Paul prayed, “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely” (1 Thess. 5:23). Sanctification is a process that continues during our lives as believers (Heb. 10:14). Only after death are the saints referred to as “perfect” (Heb. 12:23). . .

We are commanded to “be holy” (Lev. 11:44; 1 Pet. 1:15–16); to “be perfect” (Matt. 5:48); and to “present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness” (Rom. 6:19). Writing to the church of the Thessalonians, the apostle Paul made a strong plea for purity: “This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God” (1 Thess. 4:3–5).

These commands imply effort on our part. We must believe in Jesus, since we are “sanctified by faith in Him” (Acts 26:18). Through the Holy Spirit we must also “put to death the evil deeds of the body” (Rom. 8:13). Paul itemized the many “works of the flesh” from which we must separate ourselves (Gal. 5:19–21). Finally, we must walk in the Spirit in order to display the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–24).¹⁰

- B. Because the God of light has made holiness the badge of our identity in Christ, we must seek diligently to be holy, so that we might be lights in the world, and reach people with the gospel of the "Light of the world."
- C. Because God is holy we ourselves must strive to be holy if we are to experience the deepest possible relationship with Him. C. H. Spurgeon said,

“When you find you do not lose your temper under provocation as you did a year ago, you are humbly thankful. When an evil lust is driven away, and no longer haunts you, you are quietly joyful, rejoicing with trembling. When you have sustained a trial which once would have crushed you, the victory is exceedingly sweet. Every advance in holiness is an advance in secret happiness.”¹¹
- D. Thomas Watson gives three primary ways for being holy. First he points out that we must all trust in the blood of Christ by faith.

"The word is a glass to show us our spots, and Christ's blood is a fountain to wash them away." Second, we must pray to be holy. Third, we must walk with others who are holy. "Be among the spices and you will smell of them.

¹⁰ Ronald F. Youngblood, F. F. Bruce, and R. K. Harrison, Thomas Nelson Publishers, eds., *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1995).

¹¹ C. H. Spurgeon, *Barbed Arrows from the Quiver of C. H. Spurgeon* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1896), 117.

Association begets assimilation. Nothing has a greater power and energy to effect holiness than the communion of the saints."¹²

- E. Because sin is an assault on God's holiness, He must execute His judgment and wrath against it. Tozer has noted,

"Every wrathful judgment in the history of the world has been a holy act of preservation. The holiness of God, the wrath of God, and the health of the creation are inseparably united. God's wrath is His utter intolerance of whatever degrades and destroys. He hates iniquity as a mother hates the polio that takes the life of her child."¹³

*How dread are Thine eternal years,
O everlasting Lord!
By prostrate spirits day and night
Incessantly adored!*

*How beautiful, how beautiful
the sight of Thee must be,
Thine endless wisdom, boundless power,
And awful purity!*

*Oh how I fear Thee, living God!
With deepest, tenderest fears,
And worship Thee with trembling hope,
And penitential tears.*

Frederick W. Faber

¹² Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, pg. 87.

¹³ Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, pg. 106.