

The Holiness of God

Leviticus 11:44-45

To start this new year, we are joining with other churches in the Christian & Missionary Alliance in a 40 Days of Prayer focus. We will have weekly prayer gatherings on Tuesday nights for you to participate in, and there are daily devotionals that you can use by following the link in the newsletter to download a copy, or call the church office and we can print a copy for you.

We're also going to follow along with a 6-week sermon series that begins this morning. The theme is "The Attributes of God" and the Alliance leadership is wanting to help us to grow in prayer by growing in our understanding of who God is. Our prayers are shaped by our understanding of who God is because prayer isn't just a religious exercise, it's personal communication with God. So the more we understand who he is, the more it will influence our prayers and communication with him. Each week we will be focusing on a different attribute of God in the sermons and daily devotionals, with the hope that it will have an influence on how we pray throughout the week (and beyond).

This week, the attribute that we are going to look at is the holiness of God and I'm going to do the best I can to unpeel the mysteries of the holiness of God, but just know it's going to be imperfect. So may God use these imperfect efforts to do something good in our souls this morning.

The concept of holy or holiness really begins to show up in the Bible at the time of the Exodus when God brought the people of Israel up out of Egypt and across the wilderness to Mt. Sinai. He had chosen them from all the nations of the earth to be his people to whom and through whom he would reveal himself to the world. And in order to make that happen, he made a covenant with them to spell out what his relationship with them was to be like. The terms of the covenant are found in Exodus and Leviticus and as you read through those passages you find that central to the covenant and all the commands regarding their behavior, practices, relationships, and worship was the concept of "holiness." Their lives and worship and community were to be marked by holiness. Holiness wasn't explicitly defined, but it was implicitly defined through the commands of the covenant. And it included

aspects of moral purity, righteousness, goodness, justice, love, and consecration to God.

The reason why holiness was paramount and central to the laws and the covenant was explained for the first time in Leviticus 11:44-45. After giving a set of instructions regarding animals that were clean and unclean – animals they could touch and eat and animals they were forbidden to touch and eat, God said this: *“For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground. ⁴⁵ For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.”*

God had chosen the Israelites to be his people so that through them he would reveal himself to the world. Therefore, in the laws of the covenant, he was calling them to be holy because that’s who he was – holy. This command to “be holy for I am holy” is repeated throughout the covenant.

If you look up the meaning of the Hebrew word for holy or holiness you find that it means: holy, sacred, set apart. Strong’s Lexicon says: *“It signifies purity, sanctity, and separation from the common or profane... Holiness involved both moral purity and ritual cleanliness, reflecting God’s nature and His requirements for worship and community life.”*

So when we talk about the holiness of God, we aren’t just talking about one aspect of his nature, we’re talking about the very essence of his nature. Holiness isn’t part of what God is like, it’s who he is. One pastor described the holiness of God as simply “the God-ness of God.” It’s what makes him God and sets him apart from his creation. The New Bible Dictionary states: *“The idea of the holy is at the heart of God’s self-revelation... His holiness is his quintessential nature.”*

We see this in a couple passages of Scripture where the writer is given a glimpse into the heavenly throne room of God. One is in Isaiah 6:1-3: *“In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³ And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy,*

holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” Why did they proclaim “holy, holy, holy”? Because that most directly declared who God is.

The other passage is in Revelation 4:2-8 where about 800 years after Isaiah’s vision, John describes his vision of the very same scene with a little more detail, and once again, this is what was happening around the throne: *“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!”*”

The ongoing heavenly declaration of who God is, is: “holy, holy, holy.” Sacred, set apart, pure, perfect, separate from the common or profane. In a way it seems to me that all the other attributes – all the other perfections of God’s being, character and will are summed up in his holiness. God is holy. Holy is who God is. The holiness of God is the God-ness of God.

So holiness is understood by God’s revelation of himself. As God reveals himself, he is also revealing his holiness. Another word used for this is “glory.” - *“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”* I’ve heard the “glory of God” described as the manifestation or revelation of his holiness, and I think that’s a good way to understand it. Where we see the glory of God, we see his holiness revealed.

So, we’ve already seen that he reveals himself and defines his holiness through the covenant with Israel, and if Israel obeyed and lived out that covenant, they too, as the people of God, would reveal the holiness of God and be his glory for the world to behold. The church has the same purpose in this day and age. We exist to glorify God. As we are inhabited by the Holy Spirit of God and live according to the Spirit in obedience to the Word of God, we demonstrate the holiness of God for the world to see, which is why we too are called to be holy.

Scripture also makes it clear that God is revealing his holiness through the majesty and splendor of his creation – the whole earth is full of his glory. From the intricacies of the tiniest particles to the infinite expanse of the universe and all the complexities therein, God is revealing his holiness for us to marvel in. It is his glory.

The holiness of God is also, probably most directly in a visual way, revealed in the very throne room of heaven where God is seated on his throne. Only a few humans have seen a vision of this in their lives here on earth. One was Isaiah, whose description we read earlier in Isaiah 6. Another was Ezekiel, who describes what he saw in Ezekiel 1. And the third was John who describes what he saw in Revelation 4.

In each description, you read of similar things appearing on the throne: dazzling light, gleaming brilliance, fire, brightness, flashes of lightning. This is similar to what was seen the one time in history that God, in his holiness descended to earth. That happened at Mt. Sinai when he made the covenant with Israel. In Exodus 19 it says there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain. It was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.

Now, there's one more way God reveals his holiness that I want to talk about that is of utmost importance and central to what God is doing here on earth, but before I talk about that, I want to talk about something else that is related to the holiness of God that is strikingly obvious and repeated throughout all of Scripture, and that is this: as wonderful and awesome as the holiness of God is, it is also utterly devastating, destructive, and deadly to sinful humans. The holiness of God and the sinfulness of man are wholly incompatible, such that God's holiness destroys sinful man like a blazing wildfire destroys everything in its path.

So ever since the fall of man into sin in the Garden of Eden, man has had a huge problem. We cannot exist in the presence of holy God. The only way for sinful man to exist and survive is to be separated from the fullness of the presence of the holiness of God. In his holiness he would utterly destroy sinful flesh, so from the time Adam and Eve sinned, everything changed and there was separation from God. God no longer walked with them like he did in the Garden because if he did, they would die.

As time went on, God would speak to people at times in dreams and visions, but he would not dwell with them. It wasn't until he established the covenant

with Israel with all the protections of the ark of the covenant, and the mercy seat, and the inner sanctuary, and the outer veil, and the priests and the sacrifices that he could dwell in their midst. We saw that in last year's study in Leviticus. And that's what he wanted to do. So he put all those regulations in place, by his mercy and grace, so that he could dwell with his people and bless them. He was shielding them from his holiness and immediate death and ruin.

Even humans who were justified by faith and considered to be righteous like Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and John, when they encountered a fraction of the revelation of the direct presence of the holiness of God, they were flattened to the ground, on their faces, trembling, and I think that's because even though their sins had been atoned for, they were still in the flesh. They still had bodies of death that had been corrupted by sin, and in their brief encounters with the holiness of God it nearly ruined them. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

So what hope do we have of ever seeing God and being in his presence? What hope do we have of eternal life? Well there's one final way I want to talk about that God has revealed his holiness to us that most clearly reveals who he is and solves our problem with sin. He planned it from the beginning and though it was hidden for ages, it was foretold in many ways and especially through the Law and Prophets. It came to pass about 2,000 years ago. Luke 1:35 says: *"And the angel answered her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.'"* The holiness of God would come to earth in the form of a man, Jesus of Nazareth. Holy God in human flesh.

Jesus shows us what holiness looks like in human form - to help us understand holiness at our level. In Jesus, we see that holiness is life giving. Holiness is good. Holiness is perfect love. Holiness is compassion. Holiness is healing and freeing. Holiness is pure and right and just. Holiness reveals truth and exposes darkness, lies, and deception. Holiness is power over sin, sickness and death.

The Holy One became man to reveal God to us, and so that as our representative he could completely remove our sin through his death on the

cross and make us holy. Colossians 1:19-23 says: *“For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.²¹ And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him,²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven.”* Be holy, for I am holy. Without holiness no one will see God.

Christ’s death on the cross paid the penalty for our sins and through faith in him they are removed from our record completely so that we can have fellowship with our holy God. His sacrifice is so effective that the Holy Spirit of God is poured out on us and he comes to live in us and carry out the work of sanctification in us as long as we live here on earth, transforming us more and more into the image of Christ. And even though we still carry around these bodies of sin that will one day die, because Christ rose from the grave and conquered death, we will rise too, no longer clothed with sinful flesh but with glorified and holy bodies fit for heaven in which we will behold with awe and wonder the fullness of the holiness and glory of God forever and ever without being consumed.

So this week as we meditate on the holiness of God and pray to our God who is holy, may the Lord give us the proper humility, repentance, awe, wonder, reverence and gratitude as we come to him in worship and praise.