

THE HOLINESS OF GOD

INTRODUCTION

- If there is one attribute of God that has been largely dismissed from both our secular and contemporary church culture, it is the holiness of God...to many people today, holiness is a foreign concept
- We largely live in a profane, godless, and atheistic culture which attempts to erase the true God and substitute him with a god who makes us comfortable
- It is the great tragedy of our day to live with no sense of the holiness of God and no fear of God before our eyes (Rom 3:18)
- “It is one of the defining marks of our time that God is now weightless. I do not mean by this that he is ethereal but rather that he has become unimportant. He rests upon the world so inconsequentially as not to be noticeable...Those who assure the pollsters of their belief in God’s existence may nonetheless consider him less interesting than television, his commands less authoritative than their appetites for affluence and influence, [and] his judgment no more awe-inspiring than the evening news...That is weightlessness. It is a condition we have assigned him after having nudged him out on the periphery of our secularized life.”¹
- “God has been receiving a ‘makeover’ for some time now, as his ‘harsher’ attributes have been toned down or eliminated and his ‘softer’ attributes highlighted. Modern people have tamed and civilized the God of the Bible. The result is a God who is but a shadow of his former self.”²
- The world hates the idea of a holy God...because it makes them accountable to him
- Sadly, much of the same is true in the church today where there is largely a casual, low view of God
- For the most part, the contemporary church fails to understand that God is holy, majestic, fearful, mighty, awesome, and transcendent
- The old adage “familiarity breeds contempt” is unfortunately true in many Christian circles
- What is done in the name of “church” today frequently betrays a distorted view of a god made in our image, instead of the true God who made us in his image
- “My heartfelt concern for the church today is that God’s holiness is a forgotten attribute. I believe this because I am convinced that there is too much shallowness and irreverence these days regarding God. If the user-friendly god falls short anywhere, it is in regard to divine holiness. To hear many people talk today, God is a *happy* God, a *helpful* God, a *laughing* God. But a *holy* God? Hardly! Turn on the average Christian broadcast; read the average Christian book; listen to the average Christian speaker – you will probably not be awestruck with a sense of God’s holiness.”³
- Not surprisingly, a low view of God’s holiness has led to a trivialization of God in the church
- While there may be sentimental emotions about God, there is little true reverence
- “The astonished wonder and respectful awe reserved for a God who is holy and beyond our comprehension has been replaced with syrupy, feel-good, devotional thoughts about God. Such is the legacy of the user-friendly god – irreverence, superficiality, and even carnality.”⁴
- “The holiness of God is given inhospitable treatment...The modern church wants therapy not redemption, to be happy not holy; to feel good not be good; to avoid pain, not sin.”⁵

¹ David Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 88, 90.

² Terry Johnson, *The Identity and Attributes of God*, 145.

³ Steve Lawson, *Made in Our Image*, 77 (emphasis original).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ David Wells, *God in the Whirlwind: How the Holy-Love of God Reorients Our World*, 121, 126.

- This is evident in a number of ways:
 - A shift in preaching from the holiness, wrath and justice of God to the love of God
 - A shift in music from robust lyrics about the greatness of God to shallow, man-centered lyrics
 - A shift in the tenor of church services from reverent and weighty to flippant and light
- For the authors of Scripture, however, holiness is one of God’s most prominent attributes
- Although Scripture often speaks of God’s love, truth, and sovereignty, these other attributes are not presented with the same fanfare and trifold repetition as his holiness (Is 6:3; Rev 4:8)
- God is wholly and absolutely holy...a reality that must compel towering, transforming thoughts of him!
- This reality is underscored by the fact that, when Jesus taught us to pray, he instructed us to begin by recognizing his holiness: “Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name” (Matt 6:9)
- To “hallow” is to treat someone or something as holy, to set it apart as being worthy of absolute devotion
- To hallow the name of God is to revere him, to exalt him alone, to conceive of and relate to him with the greatest veneration possible, to regard him as holy
- It could be paraphrased: “May you be given that unique reverence that your character and nature as Father demand”
- It doesn’t mean that we can make God greater than he is or add anything to his holiness
- Rather, it means that we long for the greatness of God to be clearly seen among those around us
- It means a hallowing, reverencing, honoring, esteeming, valuing, and treasuring of God above all things
- Thus, the first petition of the Lord’s prayer, and our first priority in prayer and in life, is that God would be acknowledged as holy...and that he would be seen as the end and final goal of all things

WHAT DOES IT MEANT THAT GOD IS HOLY?

Definition

- There are two primary components of God’s holiness referred to in Scripture
- The primary meaning of “holy” is that which is separate; the secondary meaning is that of absence of any moral blemish
- “God’s holiness is his inherent and absolute greatness, in which he is perfectly distinct above everything outside himself and is absolutely morally separate from sin.”⁶

His Exalted Status

- When the Bible calls God “holy,” it means primarily that he is transcendentally separate...he is so far above and beyond us that he seems almost totally foreign to us
- The biblical words for “holy” (Hebrew *qadosh*; Greek *hagios*) primarily indicate a separation or the act of setting something apart
- Literally, holiness means that something or someone is cut away from, set apart, and separated
- Our word “holiday” is related to the word “holy”...a unique, separate, set apart day
- Applied to God, it means that he is entirely separate from his creation, a cut above us, and infinitely transcendent
- God is distinctly and infinitely superior to his creation and his creatures...he is majestically unique, one of a kind, and unable to be compared with anyone or anything else because he exceeds all comparisons

⁶ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 183.

- To say that God is holy is to say that he is too stunning for human beings to behold or comprehend...that his royal splendor vastly exceeds that of the most exalted human monarchs
- God is totally set apart from us, different from us, and entirely above us

Exodus 15:11 ~ Who is like You among the gods, O LORD? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, Awesome in praises, working wonders?

1 Samuel 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.

2 Chronicles 30:27 ~ Then the Levitical priests arose and blessed the people; and their voice was heard and their prayer came to His holy dwelling place, to heaven.

Psalms 5:7 ~ But as for me, by Your abundant lovingkindness I will enter Your house, At Your holy temple I will bow in reverence for You.

Psalms 22:3 ~ You are holy, O You who are enthroned upon the praises of Israel

Psalms 48:1 ~ Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, In the city of our God, His holy mountain.

Psalms 71:22 ~ I will also praise You with a harp, Even Your truth, O my God; To You I will sing praises with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel.

Psalms 89:18 ~ For our shield belongs to the LORD, And our king to the Holy One of Israel.

Psalms 97:12 ~ Be glad in the LORD, you righteous ones, And give thanks to His holy name.

Psalms 98:1 ~ O sing to the LORD a new song, For He has done wonderful things, His right hand and His holy arm have gained the victory for Him.

Psalms 99:3, 5, 9 ~ Let them praise Your great and awesome name; Holy is He...5 Exalt the LORD our God And worship at His footstool; Holy is He...9 Exalt the LORD our God And worship at His holy hill, For holy is the LORD our God.

Psalms 103:1 ~ Bless the LORD, O my soul, And all that is within me, bless His holy name.

Isaiah 40:18 ~ To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?

Luke 1:49 ~ For the Mighty One has done great things for me; And holy is His name.

John 17:11 ~ I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, the name which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are.

Revelation 6:10 ~ and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"

Revelation 15:4 ~ 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."

His Moral Perfection

- God is completely without sin or moral blemish, ethically perfect, abhorring sin and demanding purity in his moral creatures
- As an infinitely holy being, God is not neutral toward good or evil...he takes delight in all that is true, worthy, and upright
- Because his eyes are too pure to look upon evil (Hab 1:13), he cannot tolerate sin
- He is utterly and absolutely perfect

- As such, all of God’s decisions and judgments are perfect
- God has never done anything wrong and he never will as he is without error in all his ways
- He never misjudges nor does he ever cause something to happen that is not right
- Related to this, the holiness of God demands that he judge sin and that he pour out his wrath on anything that does not conform to his perfect character
- He cannot tolerate unrighteousness nor can he turn a blind eye to iniquity...his holiness requires that he display a perfect and pure hatred of sin

Leviticus 11:44 ~ 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.

Leviticus 22:32 ~ You shall not profane My holy name, but I will be sanctified among the sons of Israel; I am the LORD who sanctifies you,

Joshua 24:19 ~ Then Joshua said to the people, “You will not be able to serve the LORD, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgression or your sins.”

Job 34:10 ~ Therefore, listen to me, you men of understanding. Far be it from God to do wickedness, And from the Almighty to do wrong.

Psalms 7:11 ~ God is a righteous judge, And a God who has indignation every day.

Ezekiel 39:7 ~ My holy name I will make known in the midst of My people Israel; and I will not let My holy name be profaned anymore. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, the Holy One in Israel.

Amos 2:7 ~ These who pant after the very dust of the earth on the head of the helpless Also turn aside the way of the humble; And a man and his father resort to the same girl In order to profane My holy name.

Zechariah 8:17 ~ Also let none of you devise evil in your heart against another, and do not love perjury; for all these are what I hate,’ declares the LORD.”

1 John 1:5 ~ This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.

The Primary Attribute?

- Some have called God’s holiness “the attribute of attributes,” seeing it as the sum of all his perfections, his defining and distinguishing characteristic, his central and supreme quality
- Interestingly the threefold repetition of God’s holiness is found in Isaiah 6:3; Psalm 99:3, 5, 9; Rev 4:8...and no other attribute of God is given such emphasis in Scripture
- Some say that God’s holiness is preeminent among all of his other attributes and that his other perfections are comments on his holiness
- “God’s holiness is in a sense the foundation of all his other virtues or ‘excellencies’ insofar as God must be characterized by this sacred self-regard or reflexive purity if he is to be perfect in wisdom, power, justice, and mercy and if he is to be properly regarded by his creation.”⁷

EVIDENCES OF GOD’S HOLINESS

- How does God manifest his holiness?

⁷ Richard Muller, quoted in Terry Johnson, *The Identity and Attributes of God*, 150.

In His Law

Psalm 105:42 ~ For He remembered His holy word With Abraham His servant;

Romans 1:2 ~ which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures,

Romans 7:12 ~ So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

- The heart of God, expressed in his moral law, is one of the clearest expressions of God's holiness
- "The law is a detailing of what corresponds to the holiness of God in human behaviour and in human affairs...[teaching] us what the holiness of God requires of us in every area of life."⁸
- God's Word to us is a revelation of his holiness in the form of commands and instructions
- For example, the Ten Commandments reflect God's utter separateness and his requirement for his people to be completely separate as well

In His Attitude Toward Good and Evil

- God is fully righteous in all of his ways

Psalm 5:4 ~ For You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness; No evil dwells with You.

Psalm 11:7 ~ For the LORD is righteous, He loves righteousness; The upright will behold His face.

Psalm 33:5 ~ He loves righteousness and justice; The earth is full of the lovingkindness of the LORD.

Psalm 37:28 ~ For the LORD loves justice And does not forsake His godly ones; They are preserved forever, But the descendants of the wicked will be cut off.

- Yet, because he is holy, God also hates all that is sinful...he can't look on sin without loathing it

Psalm 7:11 ~ God is a righteous judge, And a God who has indignation every day.

Proverbs 6:16-19 ~ There are six things which the LORD hates, Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: 17 Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, And hands that shed innocent blood, 18 A heart that devises wicked plans, Feet that run rapidly to evil, 19 A false witness who utters lies, And one who spreads strife among brothers.

Isaiah 1:14 ~ I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, They have become a burden to Me; I am weary of bearing them.

Jeremiah 44:4 ~ Yet I sent you all My servants the prophets, again and again, saying, "Oh, do not do this abominable thing which I hate."

Amos 5:21 ~ I hate, I reject your festivals, Nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies.

Zechariah 8:17 ~ 'Also let none of you devise evil in your heart against another, and do not love perjury; for all these are what I hate,' declares the LORD."

Malachi 2:16 ~ "For I hate divorce," says the LORD, the God of Israel, "and him who covers his garment with wrong," says the LORD of hosts. "So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously."

In His Son

- God reveals his holiness through his Son, the most perfect image of the invisible God (Col 1:15)

⁸ Johnson, *Identity and Attributes of God*, 153-154.

Luke 1:35 ~ The angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.

Luke 4:34 ~ Let us alone! What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!

Acts 3:14 ~ But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you,

2 Corinthians 5:21 ~ He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Hebrews 4:15 ~ For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.

Hebrews 7:26 ~ For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens;

1 Peter 2:22 ~ WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH;

1 John 3:5 ~ You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin.

- Jesus spent his life on earth demonstrating his holiness in the words he spoke, in the miracles he performed, and in how he lived
- Everything he said and did was marked by holiness
- The greatest revelation of God’s holiness in Christ occurred at the cross when Jesus died to satisfy God’s righteous demands for holiness
- Christ bore the wrath of God in full, absorbing the entirety of God’s holy judgment against sin
- God is so holy that he turned his back on his Son because he could not look on the sin that Jesus had in effect become
- Nowhere else in redemptive history do we see such a demonstration of divine holiness and hatred of sin

Matthew 27:46 ~ About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?” that is, “MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?”

- “To demonstrate God’s infinite holiness, and hatred of sin, he would have the most glorious and most excellent person in heaven and earth to suffer for it. He would have his own Son to die on a disgraceful cross, and be exposed to the terrible flames of divine wrath, rather than sin should live, and his holiness remain for ever disparaged by the violations of his law.”⁹

In His People

- God demonstrates his holiness by creating a people who would demonstrate to the world his holiness by obeying his holy law and imitating his holy character

Leviticus 19:2 ~ Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.

Leviticus 20:26 ~ Thus you are to be holy to Me, for I the LORD am holy; and I have set you apart from the peoples to be Mine.

Matthew 5:48 ~ Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

⁹ Thomas Boston, quoted in Johnson, *The Identity and Attributes of God*, 159.

Romans 8:29 ~ For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren;

Ephesians 1:4 ~ just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love

Colossians 1:22 ~ yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach—

1 Peter 1:15-16 ~ 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.”

1 Peter 2:9 ~ But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God’s OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;

- The whole point of redemption – from beginning to end – is that we should be a holy people and, in so doing, should represent the holy God to an unholy world

THE KEY TEXT – ISAIAH 6

Isaiah 6:1 ~ 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

- Isaiah ministered to the southern kingdom for 52 years, from 790 to 739 BC, initially during the reign of Uzziah
- Upon the king’s death, Isaiah went to the temple to mourn and, while there, saw the Ultimate King, enthroned in all his majesty and glory, lofty and exalted
- So majestic was this vision of heaven that Isaiah described “the train of His robe filling the temple,” probably describing how immense God is

Isaiah 6:2 ~ 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.

- This is the only place seraphim (lit. “the burning, fiery ones”) are mentioned by name in the Bible
- Fire often represents God’s holiness:
 - Moses at the burning bush: Exodus 3:5 ~ Then He said, “Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”
 - The giving of the Ten Commandments: Exodus 19:18 ~ Now Mount Sinai *was* all in smoke because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently
- The two wings covering their faces was probably so that they could not see God’s face
- The two wings covering their feet probably acknowledged their humility in their service to God
- The two wings used to fly may refer to their ongoing activity in proclaiming God’s holiness and glory

Isaiah 6:3 ~ And one called out to another and said, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory.”

- The most incredible thing about the seraphim is not what they look like, but what they say
- They don’t say “grace, grace, grace...love, love, love...or wrath, wrath, wrath”...but “holy, holy, holy”
- Why the threefold repetition of “holy”? → some people suggest that it refers to the Trinity
- But it is probably better to take see it as emphasis on God’s holiness...supreme holiness!
- Repetition was one of the ways to emphasize something in Hebrew

Isaiah 6:4 ~ And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke

- As the seraphim fly back and forth about the throne singing to one another of God’s incomparable holiness, the sound of their voices causes the doorways to shake, rocking the building to its very foundation
- And not only that, the whole building filled with smoke
- This entire scene highlights the awesome presence and power and holiness of God
- God is majestically, transcendentally, and overwhelmingly holy...he is in a class by himself...pure God-ness

IMPLICATIONS OF THE HOLINESS OF GOD FROM ISAIAH 6

It Should Inform Our Attitude in Worship

Isaiah 6:3 ~ And one called out to another and said, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory.”

- This is pure, unadulterated, spontaneous worship springing from the seraphim in response to God’s holiness
- This is heart-felt, God-centered, truth-saturated worship...and when these angelic creatures come face to face with God in His infinite holiness, the only thing they can do is lift their voices in antiphonal worship
- God’s holiness compelled them to enter into corporate worship
- This is not manufactured worship, not driven by emotions, not artificially manufactured by the setting, not driven by the loudness of music or just the right mix of lights and sounds
- Rather, this is genuine, glorious, heavenly worship that springs from the heart of creatures who behold the weightiness of God’s holiness
- This tells us that worship must always be driven by the truths about who God is...theology drives doxology!
- This is theologically-informed, theologically-driven, and theologically-propelled worship
- This is important to understand...we cannot just rush thoughtlessly or irreverently into God’s presence
- Since he is holy and righteous, we cannot just approach him casually, nonchalantly, or cavalierly
- Sadly, one of the greatest weaknesses of the evangelical church is our disinclination to tremble
- God has become so casual in our thinking, that we don’t understand his utter holiness
- The absence of a clear understanding of God’s holiness is the reason the church is quite shallow today
- If we are going to recover from this weak, anemic approach to worship today, our worship must first and foremost be driven by a reverence for God’s holiness
- The church is at its strongest when it recognizes and honors the holiness of God

It Should Intensify Our Awareness of Sin

Isaiah 6:5 ~ 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.”

- A vision of God’s holiness always gives us a right view of ourselves
- Against the backdrop of God’s holiness, Isaiah became brutally aware of his sinful condition
- Isaiah had just pronounced woes (threats of judgment) on the nation in Isaiah 5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22
- But now he realized *he* was subject to judgment because he was unclean
- Overwhelmed by this glimpse of God’s holiness, Isaiah became profoundly aware of his own unclean and unworthy nature, stating “Woe is me, for I am ruined” (lit. “come apart at the seams, be unraveled”)
- One sudden glimpse of a holy God shattered all of Isaiah’s self-confidence

- As long as he could compare himself to others, he felt pretty good about himself, but the instant he measured himself by the ultimate standard, he was destroyed
- He even realized he had “unclean lips”...he knew he had a dirty mouth which was a reflection of his heart
- He suddenly had a new and radical understanding of sin...and a recognition of his great need for cleansing
- That’s what exposure to God’s holiness does...it shows you sin in your life
- If we are not deeply pained about our sin, we do not understand God’s holiness at all!

It Should Increase Our Appreciation for Grace

Isaiah 6:6-7 ~ Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. 7 He touched my mouth *with it* and said, “Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.”

- Relentless guilt over his sin overwhelmed Isaiah...but in that instant he experienced God’s abundant grace
- God didn’t confront Isaiah with His holiness merely to let him despair but to drive him to confession which leads to spiritual cleansing
- Having realized his impurity, Isaiah was brought to a point of being forgiven and cleansed
- God cleansed Isaiah by sending a seraph to remove his sin...the white-hot coal pressed to his lips (the place he felt the weight of his sin most) brought instant forgiveness
- This symbolic action signified the removal of Isaiah’s guilt and sin by God’s great grace
- His sin was taken away, his guilt was removed, and he was purged
- This is what God’s holiness does...it drives us to him for mercy and grace
- Although repentance is hard and often painful, it brings liberating spiritual cleansing

It Should Incite Our Availability for Ministry

Isaiah 6:8 ~ Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?” Then I said, “Here am I. Send me!”

- God asked the question not because he did not know or that he only hoped someone would respond
- Rather, he asked the question to give Isaiah, now cleansed, an opportunity for service
- “Having believed with certainty that he was about to be crushed into non-existence by the very holiness of God and having received an unsought for, and unmerited, complete cleansing, what else would he rather do than hurl himself into God’s service?”¹⁰
- Isaiah can’t keep silent after that experience...He is overcome by God’s holiness...undone by his own sin...and overwhelmed at God’s abundant grace
- And his only response when God asks who can he send is, “I’ll go...here am I...send me”
- This is what God’s holiness should produce in our lives as well – a deep desire to be used of him for his glory
- When you’ve gotten a glimpse of the holiness of God, you want to be used of God to tell others about him

¹⁰ John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, in *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, 186.