

God is Holy

Isaiah 6:1-8

Introduction

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” (Isaiah 6:3) This may be the penultimate verse that speaks of God’s holiness. The threefold repetition of the word holy is the Hebrew way of emphasizing something in the superlative degree. In English we say holy, holier, and holiest with holiest being the superlative form. It indicates the only one of that stature or level. If any other is equally holy to God, then God is no longer holiest. There can only be one holiest. So, what does that mean to say that God is not only holy but holiest, and how does that drive implications for us? Well, there are a couple of verses that lay out the relationship between God’s holiness and the implications for us quite clearly. Psalm 99:9 tells us, “Exalt the LORD our God; bow in worship at his holy mountain, for the LORD our God is holy.” Also, 1 Peter 1:15-16 says, “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.’” So, that’s it, right? God is holy, so worship him and live a holy life. Cut and dry, sermon over. Today, we’re beating everyone to the lunch buffet. Well, I wish it was that easy. Unfortunately, I don’t think it is that easy. The implications of God’s holiness are huge and far reaching, not only in the eternal destination of all people everywhere but in how we think about and live out the Christian life every day. I am convinced the number one reason people, believers or not, fail to respond to God as we should is because we do not adequately grasp the holiness of God. For some it is a concept that is dismissed with insolent insubordination (Genesis 3:4-6, Isaiah 14:12-14). For others it is something that leads to pragmatic piety or religiosity (Isaiah 1:11-17, Luke 11:42). What it should be is something that drives a response of awe-filled action (Isaiah 6:5-8). So, the questions I want to ask today are these. What does it mean that God is holy? How does that relate to our own holiness? What implications does that drive for us? In other words, God is holy . . . so what?

God’s holiness is the source and foundation of all holiness

First, God’s holiness is the source and foundation of all holiness. Holiness is the very foundation of who God is. It is essential to his nature. It is not an attribute of God in the way that his love, goodness, truthfulness, and other attributes Steve has taught on are. It is the source from which all those attributes spring. Because God is holy, he is perfectly loving; because God is holy, he is perfectly righteous; and because God is holy, he is perfectly just. If he were not perfect in any of his attributes, he would not be holy. If he were not holy, he could not be perfect in his attributes.

What does it mean to be holy? In the Bible we see two different words that are translated holy, the Hebrew word *qados* in the Old Testament and the Greek word *hagios* in the New Testament. Depending on the context, they both carry the meaning of set apart or separate, morally blameless, exalted, and worthy of reverence and worship. In reference to God, holy refers to his transcendence above all of his creation, as well as his moral perfection and separation from evil. In his Systematic Theology, Louis Berkhof writes of God, “He is absolutely distinct from all his creatures and is exalted above them in infinite majesty.” “He is separate from moral evil or sin. ‘Holiness’ points to God’s majestic purity, or ethical majesty.” (Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 73) We see this in the first 3 verses of Isaiah 6. God is seated on a throne high and lifted up which portrays his transcendence and the exalted state above all of his creation. The seraphim each have six wings. With two wings they cover their faces indicating that God in his holiness cannot even be

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looked upon. With two other wings they cover their feet out of recognition of their own humility before the majestic purity of God their creator. With the last two wings they fly which demonstrates the active service they render to God in response to his holiness. They cry out to worship him saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." I don't think we can really comprehend the level of purity and transcendence that God's holiness is.

In reference to things and persons, holy refers to being set apart for service to God which necessitates a moral purity such that things and people set apart for service to God must be purified before they can be used in that service. In the Bible we see things being described as holy such as when, at the burning bush, God tells Moses to remove his sandals because he is standing on holy ground. We also see it in reference to utensils for use in the temple worship ceremonies as well as the priests who perform those ceremonies. We see it in reference to the angels which are commonly referred to as "holy angels." We see it used in reference to the Israelites being a holy nation and used in the same way to refer to Christians in the New Testament church. It is used in describing the Holy Scriptures. In all of these situations these things are referred to as holy only because of the connection they have to God. They are not holy because of anything in themselves but because they are connected to or come from a perfectly holy God. The problem is we cannot be holy on our own, but neither can we in our sinful state be connected to God who is the source and foundation of all holiness.

We have a holiness problem

We have a holiness problem. God's holiness means that he can neither be in the presence of sin nor condone it in his creation. God's holiness demands holiness from his creatures in the form of worship and living a holy life. We see the theme of worshiping God because of his holiness throughout the Bible. Psalm 99 speaks of the worship that God's holiness demands in three sections separated by repetition of a similar refrain in verses 3, 5, and 9 that is essentially worship God because he is holy, and in Revelation 15:4 we see that in the end all nations will worship God for his holiness. In the meantime, Romans 1:18-25 says that even though God's glory is apparent to all in creation, mankind has failed to worship God and been given over to the lust of their hearts such that no one seeks God (Romans 3:10-11) much less worships him.

Additionally, God's holiness demands that we live a holy life. We see the statement, "be holy, for I am holy" repeated over and over in Leviticus 11:44, 19:2, and 20:7 then quoted by Peter in 1 Peter 1:16. This command to be holy is given to people chosen by God to be his own, but what of other people? Is the requirement for holiness only for those who follow God? No, throughout the Bible we see either the punishment of the wicked, as God did in Noah's day with the flood and later to Sodom and Gomorrah, or the promise of the punishment of the wicked as seen in 2 Peter 3:7. To not be holy is to be wicked, and God punishes the wicked. It is also important to understand that worshiping God for his holiness is part of living a holy life. Worshiping God and living a holy life are inextricably linked.

Since mankind fails to worship God and none of us are morally perfect, then not only can we not be in God's presence, but his holiness demands that he judge and execute justice on us for our lack of holiness. If he did not dispense judgment on sin, then he would not be holy. Before an infinitely holy God, even the most minute, finite sin demands infinite justice executed through the pouring out of

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infinite wrath in judgment. A finite being such as us would take an eternity and still never receive the full measure of this wrath, but Jesus, fully infinite God, was able to receive it all on the cross. Think about that for a moment. The future of every person who is not holy is to experience an eternity of God's wrath, something so awful that Jesus was in extreme agony the night before going to the cross. We have already established, however, that nothing besides God has any holiness in itself. People are only holy as they are connected to God and draw their holiness from him, but our own lack of holiness prevents that connection from happening. It seems as if we are doomed.

Holiness from God through Jesus

If we were left on our own, we would be doomed, but we were not left on our own. God made a way for us to receive holiness from God through Jesus. Jesus chose to go to the cross and lay down his life for those of us who are not holy. Peter tells us in 1 Peter 2:24 that Jesus "bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness." Jesus, who is infinite God, took on our sin and received the infinite wrath of God that our sin deserved. Why? So that those who have faith in Jesus can be justified before God while God maintains the justness that his holiness requires. (Romans 3:26) If God did not act justly by punishing sin, then he would not be holy. But what does it mean to be justified before God? Ephesians 1:3-4 answers that. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him." That's what it means to be justified, to be holy and blameless before God, and as we have seen in other things which are holy, it is not a holiness in or from ourselves; it is a holiness from a connection to God. It is a holiness given from God through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. (Romans 3:22)

We are holy to God for a purpose

God is not making us holy just so we can spend eternity with him. We are holy to God for a purpose. After Isaiah pronounces an oracle of judgment on himself in verse 5 a really interesting thing happens in verses 6 and 7. One of the seraphim removes a coal from the altar and touches Isaiah's lips with it. When he does, he says, "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." What's that all about? Do you remember the definitions of holy? It not only means morally blameless; it also means set apart or separated for service to God. Also remember that in order to be used in service to God something must be purified for that service. There is a word that specifically is used to describe this separation and purification for service to God; it is consecrated. What we are seeing in these verses is Isaiah being consecrated to take God's message to Israel. What's interesting is that he is consecrated in verse 7 before he receives the call from God in verse 8. God always prepares us before he calls us. If he calls us, he has prepared us. Isaiah's response to God's query, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" is the only response he can make in light of his coming face to face with the holiness of God and recognizing his own sin and being forgiven. He says, "Here I am! Send me."

In a similar way, we are consecrated by God. 1 Peter 2:9 tells us that we "are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." If you were to ask one of my sons, Nate or

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Ben, “What is the chief end of man?” you would be met with the answer, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” That is question 1 from the Westminster Shorter Catechism. The phrase “chief end” is old language, obviously, since the catechism was written in 1646 and 1647. To state it in a more modern way would be to use the phrase “primary purpose.” Man’s primary purpose is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever. That is the purpose for which you were called to faith in Jesus, to glorify God, and that is what “proclaiming the excellencies” of God does. Yet we don’t just glorify God by proclaiming his excellencies, we also glorify God with our lives. Just 3 verses later in 1 Peter 2:12, Peter writes that they should keep their “conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.” Our good deeds are a ground for others to glorify God. Jesus says a similar thing in Matthew 5:16; “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

So what?

Let’s see if we can draw some implications from all of this. First, and most importantly, if you have never through faith believed in Jesus then you stand condemned before an infinitely holy God as we all do without Jesus. You may think you’re not that bad, but even sinless, holy angels recognized their state before the infinite holiness of God. Do not be fooled by the idea that God will wink at sin. He will not; if he did then he would not be holy. If you are realizing your state before an infinitely holy God for the first time, then turn to him in faith today. It is simple, but it is not simplistic. It is the most important thing you will ever do in your life. Admit your sin and need to be forgiven. Believe in Jesus, his death on the cross in bearing your sins and receiving your punishment, and his resurrection to guarantee eternal life. Then, commit to following him in obedience, living a holy life, as best you can as you grow in holiness.

If we look back at Isaiah 6:3 again we see the seraphim calling out, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” Let’s step back and take a big picture view of this. Because God is supremely holy and exalted above all of his creation, his glory fills the earth. There is nowhere where the glory of God is not. The glory of God is in the jungles of Indonesia, the mountains of Tibet, the desert of Saudi Arabia, the projects of New York, the hills of Hollywood, and the coffee shop you go to every day. Yet, if the earth is full of God’s glory, then people everywhere should be glorifying God, but they are not and they will be judged. Therefore, we must go and fulfill the purpose for which we were saved. We magnify God’s glory before a lost world. Not magnify in the sense of a microscope making something small appear big; God’s glory is not small. Magnify in the sense of a telescope that takes something that is far away and brings it closer to see. We must bring God’s glory close to people who are surrounded by it in the hope that they will see his glory and through faith in Jesus worship him. We must do this with both our walk and our words. We can do it individually in the circle of people we interact with each day. We can do it as a church corporately through missions, outreach, and church planting. The lostness of the world around us should not give us confidence in our own flawed righteousness. It should grieve us and cause us to proclaim his excellencies. Our primary purpose is to glorify God before a lost world, and his majestic holiness should compel us to awe-filled action in doing that just as it did Isaiah.