

2

The Holiness of God

BUT JUST AS HE WHO CALLED
YOU IS HOLY, SO BE HOLY IN
ALL YOU DO; FOR IT IS
WRITTEN: "BE HOLY, BECAUSE
I AM HOLY."

1 Peter 1:15-16

God has called every Christian to a holy life. There are no exceptions to this call. It is not a call only to pastors, missionaries, and a few dedicated Sunday School teachers. Every Christian of every nation, whether rich or poor, learned or unlearned, influential or totally unknown, is called to be holy. The Christian plumber and the Christian banker, the unsung housewife and the powerful head of state are all alike called to be holy.

This call to a holy life is based on the fact that God Himself is holy. Because God is holy, He requires that we be holy. Many Christians have what we might call a "cultural holiness." They adapt to the character and behavior pattern of Christians around them. As the Christian culture around them

is more or less holy, so these Christians are more or less holy. But God has not called us to be like those around us. He has called us to be like Himself. Holiness is nothing less than conformity to the character of God.¹

As used in Scripture, holiness describes both the majesty of God and the purity and moral perfection of His nature. Holiness is one of His attributes;² that is, holiness is an essential part of the nature of God. His holiness is as necessary as His existence, or as necessary, for example, as His wisdom or omniscience. Just as He cannot but *know* what is right, so He cannot but *do* what is right.

We ourselves do not always know what is right, what is just and fair. At times we agonize over decisions having moral overtones. "What is the right thing to do?" we ask. God, of course, never faces this predicament. His perfect knowledge precludes any uncertainty on what is right and wrong.

But sometimes, even when we know what is right there is a reluctance on our part to do it. The right action may involve sacrifice, or a blow to our pride (for example, when we know we should confess a sin to someone), or some other obstacle. But here again, this is never true with God. God never vacillates. He always does what is just and right without the slightest hesitation. It is impossible in the very nature of God for Him to do otherwise.

God's holiness then is perfect freedom from all evil. We say a garment is clean when it is free from any spot, or gold is pure when all dross has been

refined from it. In this manner we can think of the holiness of God as the absolute absence of any evil in Him. John said, "God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). Light and darkness, when used this way in Scripture, have moral significance. John is telling us that God is absolutely free from any moral evil and that He is Himself the essence of moral purity.

The holiness of God also includes His perfect conformity to His own divine character. That is, all of His thoughts and actions are consistent with His holy character. By contrast, consider our own lives. Over time, as we mature in the Christian life, we develop a certain degree of Christian character. We grow in such areas as truthfulness, purity, and humility. But we do not always act consistently with our character. We tell a lie or allow ourselves to get trapped into a series of impure thoughts. Then we are dismayed with ourselves for these actions because they are inconsistent with our character. This never happens to God. He always acts consistently with His holy character. And it is this standard of holiness that God has called us to when He says, "Be holy, because I am holy."

The absolute holiness of God should be of great comfort and assurance to us. If God is perfectly holy, then we can be confident that His actions toward us are always perfect and just. We are often tempted to question God's actions and complain that He is unfair in His treatment of us. This is the devil's lie, the same thing he did to Eve. He essentially told her, "God is being unfair to you" (Genesis 3:4-5). But it is impossible in the very

nature of God that He should ever be unfair. Because He is holy, all His actions are holy.

We must accept by faith the fact that God is holy, even when trying circumstances make it appear otherwise. To complain against God is in effect to deny His holiness and to say He is not fair. In the seventeenth century Stephen Charnock said, "It is less injury to Him to deny His being, than to deny the purity of it; the one makes Him no God, the other a deformed, unlovely, and a detestable God. . . . he that saith God is not holy speaks much worse than he that saith there is no God at all."³

I still vividly recall how God first dealt with me over 25 years ago about complaining against Him. In response to His will, I had settled in San Diego, California, and had begun to look for a job. When several weeks went by without success, I mentally began to accuse God. "After all, I gave up my plans to do His will and now He has let me down." God graciously directed my attention to Job 34:18-19: "Is it fit to say to a king, 'Thou art wicked', and to princes, 'Ye are ungodly'? How much less to Him that accepteth not the persons of princes, nor regardeth the rich more than the poor, for they all are the work of His hands" (KJV). As soon as I read that passage I immediately fell to my knees confessing to Him my terrible sin of complaining and questioning His holiness. God mercifully forgave and the next day I received two job offers.

Acknowledging His holiness is one of the ways we are to praise God. According to John's vision of heaven described in Revelation 4, the four living creatures around God's throne never stop saying,

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come" (Revelation 4:8). The seraphim in Isaiah's vision of God's glory also uttered this threefold ascription of God's holiness (Isaiah 6:3). When Moses was praising God for the deliverance of the Israelites from Pharaoh's army, he also sang of God's holiness:

"Who is like Thee among the gods, O Lord?
Who is like Thee, majestic in holiness,
Awesome in praises, working wonders?"

(Exodus 15:11)

God is often called in Scripture by such names as the Holy One, or the Holy One of Israel.⁴ Holy, according to Stephen Charnock,⁵ is used more often as a prefix to His name than any other attribute. Holiness is God's crown. Imagine for a moment that God possessed omnipotence (infinite power), omniscience (perfect and complete knowledge), and omnipresence (everywhere present), but without perfect holiness. Such a one could no longer be described as God. Holiness is the perfection of all His other attributes: His power is holy power, His mercy is holy mercy, His wisdom is holy wisdom. It is His holiness more than any other attribute that makes Him worthy of our praise.

But God demands more than that we acknowledge His holiness. He says to us, "Be holy, because I am holy." God rightfully demands perfect holiness in all of His moral creatures. It cannot be otherwise. He cannot possibly ignore or approve of any evil committed. He cannot for one moment relax His perfect standard of holiness. Rather He must say, as He does say, "So be holy in *all* you do." The Prophet

Habakkuk declared, "Thine eyes are too pure to approve evil, and Thou canst not look on wickedness with favor" (Habakkuk 1:13). Because God is holy, He can never excuse or overlook any sin we commit, however small it may be.

Sometimes we try to justify to God some action which our own conscience calls into question. But if we truly grasp the significance of God's perfect holiness, both in Himself and in His demands of us, we will readily see we can never justify before Him even the slightest deviation from His perfect will. God does not accept the excuse, "Well, that's just the way I am," or even the more hopeful statement, "Well, I'm still growing in that area of my life."

No, God's holiness does not make allowance for minor flaws or shortcomings in our personal character. Well might we Christians, though justified solely through the righteousness of Christ, ponder carefully the words of the writer to the Hebrews: "Make every effort . . . to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14).

Because God is holy, He cannot ever tempt us to sin. "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone" (James 1:13). Probably none of us ever imagines that God is actively soliciting us to do evil, but we may feel that God has put us in a situation where we have no choice.

King Saul felt this way in his first major campaign against the Philistines (1 Samuel 13). Before going into battle Saul was to wait seven days for the Prophet Samuel to come and offer a burnt

offering and ask the favor of the Lord. Saul waited the seven days for Samuel. When he didn't come, Saul became anxious and took it on himself to offer the burnt offering. Saul felt he had no alternative. The people were fearful and had begun to scatter; the Philistines were assembling for battle; Samuel was overdue. Something had to be done! God had put him in a place where he had no choice, it seemed, but to disobey God's explicit instructions.

But because Saul disobeyed God's express will, he lost his kingdom (1 Samuel 13:13-14). What about us? Do we sometimes feel we have no choice but to shade the truth a little, or commit just a slightly dishonest act? When we feel this way, we are in effect saying that God is tempting us to sin, that He has put us in a position where we have no alternative.

People under authority are particularly vulnerable to this temptation. Supervisors often put pressure on those below them to commit dishonest or unethical acts. As a young officer in the Navy I faced this temptation. For a few pounds of coffee to the right people, our ship could get "free" all kinds of valuable equipment we needed to do our job. "And after all," so the reasoning went, "it all belongs to the Navy." I finally had to stand up to my commanding officer and, in jeopardy to my Navy career, tell him I could have no part of that.

Because God is holy, He hates sin. Hate is such a strong word we dislike using it. We reprove our children for saying they hate someone. Yet when it comes to God's attitude toward sin, only a strong word such as hate conveys an adequate depth of

meaning. Speaking of various sins in Israel, God says, "For all these things are what I hate" (Zechariah 8:17). Hatred is a legitimate emotion when it comes to sin. In fact, the more we ourselves grow in holiness, the more we hate sin. David said, "From Thy precepts, I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way" (Psalm 119:104). Now if that is true of a man, think of God. As we grow in holiness, we grow in hatred of sin; and God, being infinitely holy, has an infinite hatred of sin.

We often say, "God hates the sin but loves the sinner." This is blessedly true, but too often we quickly rush over the first half of this statement to get to the second. We cannot escape the fact that God hates our sins. We may trifle with our sins or excuse them, but God hates them.

Therefore every time we sin, we are doing something God hates. He hates our lustful thoughts, our pride and jealousy, our outbursts of temper, and our rationalization that the end justifies the means. We need to be gripped by the fact that God hates all these things. We become so accustomed to our sins we sometimes lapse into a state of peaceful coexistence with them, but God never ceases to hate them.

We need to cultivate in our own hearts the same hatred of sin God has. Hatred of sin as sin, not just as something disquieting or defeating to ourselves, but as displeasing to God, lies at the root of all true holiness. We must cultivate the attitude of Joseph, who said when he was tempted, "How then could I do this great evil, and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9)

God hates sin wherever He finds it, in saint and sinner alike. He does not hate sin in one person and overlook it in another. He judges each man's works impartially (1 Peter 1:17). In fact, biblical evidence indicates that God may judge the sins of His saints more severely than those of the world. David was a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22), yet after his sin against Uriah, he was told, "Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house" (2 Samuel 12:10). Moses, for one act of unbelief, was excluded from the land of Canaan despite many years of faithful service. Jonah, for his disobedience, was cast into a horrible prison in the stomach of a giant fish for three days and nights, that he might learn not to run from the command of God.

In the deceitfulness of our hearts, we sometimes play with temptation by entertaining the thought that we can always confess and later ask forgiveness. Such thinking is exceedingly dangerous. God's judgment is without partiality. He never overlooks our sin. He never decides not to bother, since the sin is only a small one. No, God hates sin intensely whenever and wherever He finds it.

Frequent contemplation on the holiness of God and His consequent hatred of sin is a strong deterrent against trifling with sin. We are told to live our lives on earth as strangers in reverence and fear (1 Peter 1:17). Granted, the love of God to us through Jesus Christ should be our primary motivation to holiness. But a motivation prompted by God's hatred of sin and His consequent judgment on it is no less biblical.

34 *The Pursuit of Holiness*

The holiness of God is an exceedingly high standard, a perfect standard. But it is nevertheless one that He holds us to. He cannot do less. While it is true that He accepts us solely through the merit of Christ, God's standard for our character, our attitudes, affections, and actions is, "Be holy, because I am holy." We must take this seriously if we are to grow in holiness.

-
- NOTES: 1. Holiness "is characteristically Godlikeness" (G. B. Stevens, in *Hastings Bible Dictionary*, as quoted by W. E. Vine in *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* [1940; single volume edition, London: Oliphants, Ltd., 1957], page 227). Charles Hodge, writing on the phrase in Romans 6:19, *righteousness unto holiness*, said, "The proximate result of obedience to God is inward conformity to the Divine image" (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [1886; reprint edition, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955], page 209). A. W. Pink said, "Holiness . . . consists of that internal change or renovation of our souls whereby our minds, affections and wills are brought into harmony with God" (*The Doctrine of Sanctification* [Swengel, Pennsylvania: Bible Truth Depot, 1955], page 25).
2. Attributes as applied to God refer to His essential qualities, and are inferred from Scriptures describing God. His attribute of

holiness is taken from such passages as Exodus 15:11, Leviticus 19:2, Psalm 89:35, Isaiah 57:15, and 1 Peter 1:15-16.

3. Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (reprint edition, Evansville, Indiana: Sovereign Grace Book Club, 1958), page 449.
4. For examples see Psalm 89:18, Isaiah 40:25 and 43:14, Hosea 11:9, Habakkuk 3:3, Jeremiah 51:5, and Ezekiel 39:7.
5. Charnock, *Existence and Attributes*, page 448.