**Lesson 3: The Holiness of God**

1 Peter 1:15-16

15But as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

Our God is completely unlike the gods of the nations. Their gods have eyes but cannot see, ears but cannot hear, mouths but cannot speak (cf. Ps. 115:4-7). We serve a living God who sees all things, hears our prayers, and reveals His truth to us (cf. Jer. 10:10). Their gods require human hands to serve them. Our God is not served by human hands as if He needed anything (Acts 17:24-25). In fact, the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28). The gods of the nations were formed out of metal or wood. We worship the Creator God who is from everlasting to everlasting. In other words, our God is completely set apart from the world. Not only is He unlike the gods of the nations, He is also unlike anything else in all creation. This truth is related to the idea that God is holy.

The term "holy" comes from a Hebrew word *qadosh*, which means "separate" or "set apart." The Greek word, *hagios*, carries the same connotation. The holiness of God is a unique attribute in that it defines all of God's other attributes. Gerhardus Vos says of God's holiness,

Taking the divine holiness in this form, we can easily perceive that it is not really an attribute to be co-ordinated with the other attributes distinguished in the divine nature. It is something co-extensive with and applicable to everything that can be predicted of God: He is holy in everything that characterizes Him and reveals Him, holy in His goodness and grace, no less than in His righteousness and wrath.[[1]](#footnote-1)

So, God's love is holy love, His grace is holy grace, etc. In this sense, God's holiness defines Him as the one true God. He is God and there is no other (Deut. 6:4).

There are two basic aspects to God's holiness. These two aspects categorically separate the attribute of holiness from all of God’s other attributes. The first aspect of holiness is that it refers to God’s transcendent majesty. In this sense, holiness is "incommunicable" or unable to be passed on as an attribute to the rest of creation. Apart from any moral connotation, God is completely separate from and greater than anyone or anything. John Feinberg writes, “As the majestic God whose qualities know no boundary, God’s being is infinitely above his creatures. Moreover, as distinct from creation, he does not depend on anyone or anything to bring him into existence or to sustain him in being."[[2]](#footnote-2)

The second aspect of God's holiness is in reference to His moral perfection. In this sense, God's holiness is "communicable," or able to be passed on as an attribute of the rest of creation. God is morally separate from and purer than anyone or anything else. Louis Berkhoff writes,

The fundamental idea of the ethical holiness of God is also that of separation, but in this case it is a separation from moral evil or sin. In virtue of His holiness God can have no communion with sin . . . . Used in this sense, the word ‘holiness’ points to God’s majestic purity, or ethical majesty. But the idea of ethical holiness is not merely negative (separation from sin); it also has a positive content, namely, that of moral excellence, or ethical perfection.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Even though this aspect of holiness is communicable in that all believers are called to be holy as He is holy (1 Pet. 1:15-16), still God's holiness is incomparable to the holiness demanded of His creatures. Consider the holy angels who never sinned and yet covered their eyes and their feet in worship of the perfect Holy One (Isa. 6:1-3). In His majestic holiness, God is magnified and exalted above all created things in heaven and on earth.

*Questions for Discussion*

1. What is the difference between God's transcendent holiness and His moral holiness?

2. In what ways is God's holiness an incommunicable attribute? In what ways is it a communicable attribute?

3. Why do you think it is significant in Isaiah 6:1-3 that the angels referred to God as "Holy, holy, holy!"?

4. Read Isaiah 40:25-26. What does this passage reveal about God's transcendent holiness?

5. What do the following passages say about God's moral holiness?

a. Job 34:10, 12.

b. Ezekiel 43:7-8.

c. James 1:13.

John Frame: "Holiness, then, is God's capacity and right to arouse our reverent awe and wonder. It is his uniqueness (Ex. 15:11; 1 Sam. 2:2), his transcendence as our Creator. It is his majesty, for the holy God is like a great king, whom we dare not treat like other persons. Indeed, God's holiness impels us to worship in his presence."[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Holy, Holy, Holy**

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!

Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee;

Holy, holy, holy! merciful and mighty!

God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

Holy, holy, holy! all the saints adore Thee,

Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea;

Cherubim and seraphim falling down before Thee,

Which wert and art and evermore shalt be.

Holy, holy, holy! though the darkness hide Thee,

Though the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see;

Only Thou art holy – there is none beside Thee,

Perfect in pow'r, in love and purity.

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!

All Thy works shall praise Thy name in earth and sky and sea;

Holy, holy, holy! merciful and mighty!

God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

*Thoughts for Application*

1. How does an understanding of the holiness of God deepen your worship of Him?

2. What is the relationship of God's holiness to the gospel? How does God's holiness make His grace more amazing?

3. How does a knowledge of the holiness of God affect your attitude in corporate worship? How might it affect your prayer life?

4. What does it mean to "be holy as God is holy"? What are some ways you can better pursue holiness in your life?

5. Write out a short prayer reflecting on the truths of this doctrine. How might you glorify God in prayer in light of His holiness?

1. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1948), 246. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001), 340. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Louis Berkhoff, “Systematic Theology,” in *Systematic Theology: New Combined Edition* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John Frame, *Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: P & R Publishing, 2013), 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)