

The Holiness of God

by J. Glyn Owen

The sermon explores the profound holiness of God, emphasizing its significance in worship and understanding His nature.

Duration: 44:03

Scripture: Exodus 15:11, Leviticus 11:44, Leviticus 19:2, Leviticus 20:7, Isaiah 40:25, Matthew 5:48, 1 Peter 1:14-16

Topics: "Holiness Of God"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the topic of the holiness of God. He emphasizes that holiness is not just a characteristic of God, but it also represents His will for His creatures. The speaker highlights that holiness is mentioned in religious contexts and is connected to four aspects: the nature of God, the duty of man, the work of grace in the Christian and the church, and the state of future glory. The speaker encourages a deeper understanding of holiness and emphasizes the importance of seeing truth in its divine context.

Transcript

Thank you very much. I don't know what you've done, but my nose has begun to bleed just as you were talking about me, so... So, you've said something you shouldn't say. I'll try and control this, wherever it goes.

Fortunately, I have a hanky with me. But, anyway, if you see it dripping, just forget about me. It's good to be here.

Isn't the Lord wonderful? He keeps us in life, to start off with, and grants us the privilege of walking with Him, and of hearing His voice, and of sometimes representing Him. And on this, another Lord's Day, He is where He has promised to be. Now, let's seek His face.

Our Heavenly Father, it is in the name of Your dear Son that we turn our thoughts, our hearts, turn the whole gaze of our souls upon You, as we gather around Your Word, particularly to think of Yourself in Your unspeakable majesty and sanctity. We are incapable of this exercise, incapable at our best, and so we are utterly, utterly dependent upon the enabling that You give from the throne, by the Spirit, moment by moment. Take us now into Your charge, therefore in a special way, to the end that Yours and Yours alone may be the glory, through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Savior.

Amen. Well now, you are involved in a very serious and a very basic study, and I congratulate those of you who are responsible for choosing this theme. It certainly is very, very basic, and you have given me what is probably the most basic in the entire study of God and His world, namely, the holiness of God.

This is a subject, I believe, that is often considerably misunderstood, in that it is rarely seen in the totality of its biblical representation. We have a habit, especially in our 20th century, of tearing things up into bits. We've got no time to see things in their wholeness.

We are not disciplined like our fathers were. When you go back as far as the Puritans of the 18th, 19th century, 17th century too, you find that they took time. If they had to get up at two o'clock in the morning and be on their knees till they went to work next day, they had to take the time to cover the areas of their study in Scripture.

We don't do that. We have our daily readings, they're set, and we go from verse 1 to verse 5, or 15 as the case may be, and we very rarely get a picture of the whole. We have a snippet, and it may be good, it may be true, it may be marvellous as far as it goes, but we have lost the capacity almost to see things in their God-given, as the Germans put it, *sitz im Leben*, in their setting in life, in their divinely arranged context.

Truth out of its context is never clear. Truth out of its context, even though it is truth, it doesn't sit well. But truth in its context is the most remarkable thing that you can contemplate.

Now, coming to this subject this morning, there are just two preliminary remarks I want to make. One, I shall be emphasising the holiness of God, but I want to say at the very beginning, I want to say that I am aware that the holiness of God is but one of God's attributes, and I would like you to remember that. I am asked to speak about this, and when a speaker takes one of many attributes, or an aspect of a larger subject, the danger is that the preacher conveys the impression, this is the only one that matters.

I don't want to do that. This is very basic, this is very fundamental, this is central and cardinal, yet it has to be seen in context and in concert with everything that God has revealed about himself. The other preliminary remark is this.

I want us to remember that in dealing with the attributes of God, we are dealing with something impersonal, but something impersonal that belongs to a person. The attribute, per se, is an it. We would refer to it with a neuter pronoun.

But the attribute is really an aspect of the nature of him with whom we have to do. And if we can bridge that gulf, and not think of any of God's attributes as an it, but as an aspect of his nature, and see the God whose attribute it is, I think we shall be able to worship as well as to learn. You do not worship an it.

We must worship him. Now then, the first main thing it seems to me that we should do, albeit briefly, is this. In coming to consider the holiness of God, we need to consider holiness in principle.

What is holiness? Not holiness in God or holiness in us. What is holiness? Holiness in God or holiness in us. And this is essentially a linguistic study.

I am not going into it, but I want to get the substance arising out of studies that have gone into this. And it is not difficult. It is very easy to get it.

The biblical vocabulary is very significant. Any introduction by a student into linguistic studies soon brings out the fact that words, like people, come in families. You very rarely have a word that does not belong to a family.

A noun, a verb, a pronoun, an adverb, a participle, and all the rest of it, and they are together, and there are shades of meaning represented, especially in Semitic languages. The various tenses and intensity of a verb in Hebrew gives you a sense of pressure, or of power, or of causation, along with the complex of the word itself. Now, I am tempted to go into details.

I do not want to do that. Two families. The Holy Spirit has brought about two families of words, one in the Old Testament, one in the New.

In the Old Testament, the basic structure is what we would describe as the letter Q, the letter D. Not exactly our D, either. It is more like the Welsh. You know, Welsh is nearer the language of heaven.

It is a soft D, a th. K, th, and an SH, which belongs to most others. So that the Hebrew word kodesh means holiness.

If you put an article before it, it means the Holy One, and so forth. And then there are variations of that. Now, that is one family in the Old Testament.

When you come to the New Testament, written in Greek, you have the same kind of thing again. The Holy Spirit has got hold of another family of words. And here are three consonants at the base.

H, A, G, hag. The Greek word for hagios, the Greek word for holiness, is hagios, or holy hagios, with variations here and there. Now, what do these mean? One in the Old Testament, used throughout the Old Testament, not just by one writer in one place, or half a dozen places, or a hundred places, but throughout the Old Testament, and in the New Testament, there are others.

What is the meaning of these terms? Fundamentally, they mean to set apart. You've got to add something to that. In all the usages within the biblical narratives, it is a setting of something or of someone apart for God.

Now, I cannot pause to enlarge upon that, even though it is, I think, a very, very important addition. It's not just the linguistic set-apartness. The Pharisees were set apart.

But it is not possible to say that they were always set apart for God. And you and I may have things that are set apart, and in that sense, linguistically, we could use this word for them. Either the Greek or the Hebrew.

But the implication in the New Testament and the Old is this. What is holy is set apart to be the Lord's, or to fulfill the purpose that God had for it. Dr. Jim Packer, whom Knox people know fairly well, has an act sometimes of being very precise and concise.

Not always, but sometimes he has. And he has culled together some of the teaching about holiness, which I think is excellent. It's a summary.

You'll think it's very, very simple. But when you get down and see what it represents, you will find that it is very significant. I quote.

These words are found only in religious contexts, when the relations of God and his creatures are under discussion. In these contexts, however, they are used in four connections. They denote, one, the nature of God, two, the duty of man, three, the work of grace in and upon the Christian and the Church, and four, the state of future glory.

Now this is important. Very important. You see, holiness is not simply something in God, period.

And we're only describing God in his selfhood. Holiness belongs to God. It represents the will of God for his total creatures, as represented in his law and in the teaching of the prophets and of the apostles and of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The sum total teaching of the Bible comes to this. God demands holiness from his creatures. That's the demand note of God to mankind.

Then these words describe the work of grace that makes all this possible. In the hearts of Christian men and women individually, and of the Church as a community. And then finally, these terms are used to describe God's home, the city of God, and our home, if our home is to be with God.

It is the city bright, whose gates are closed to sin, not that defiles shall ever enter in. Everything that defiles shall be cast out. Heaven is a holy place.

It is the holy city. Many of us are shattered by the reference, see our good friend here from Israel, whom we admire with her husband for their tenacity and perseverance in the Lord. At Israel, Jerusalem is sometimes called the holy city.

It is no longer a holy city in the biblical sense. It has become a very unholy place, which is exceedingly sad, and our prayer is that once again, it may become holy in the full, odd, biblical sense. Well now, that brings us to the next main division in our study this morning, the holiness of God.

Let me refer to some biblical passages. There are so many, far too many to quote, of course. So these are chosen just to remind you of the thrust of the Bible.

Moses asks in Exodus chapter 15 and verse 11, Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders? God asks concerning himself in Isaiah 40, 25. Now, God himself, asking concerning himself. Here is the question.

To whom will you liken me? Or who is my equal, says the Holy One. And he refers to himself. This is not something that Isaiah adds, says the Holy One.

God uses those words himself. That very title of God, the Holy One, is used over 40 times between 2 Kings 19.22 and Habakkuk 3.3. And the phrase, the Holy One of Israel, is used 24 times within the same compass. Of course, we are all familiar with Isaiah's great words in chapter 6. He heard the seraphim chant antiphonally.

That is one to another. We can't say exactly how this was. It seems as if they are divided maybe in two sections of a choir.

And the one side sings, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory. And the other side answers antiphonally.

And so it goes on. That is the kind of impression which the best linguists, it seems to me, get out of the text. Whether that is actually accurate, I would not like to be certain.

But it is something of that kind. There is an antiphonal aspect to the music and to the words here. But supremely, though we say it in few words, with reference to the holiness of God, I think one of the most outstanding and important references is that from Jesus himself.

In his high priestly prayer, in John chapter 17 and verse 11, when Jesus, the Son of God, remember who he was, remember that he was the incarnate Lord, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, incarnate in our human nature. And here he is now, in his high priestly ministry, praying to the Father on behalf of those, he says, whom the Father has given to him. And he addresses God as Holy Father.

A little later on as All-Righteous Father. You see, some of us get too chummy with the Almighty to be honorable. He is not the man next door.

And he is not the man up there. He is the Holy One of Israel. And we need to have respect in our souls when we draw near to him.

Jesus did. Though equal with God, he did not, as it were, take advantage of that relationship and use terms that were less than honorable. Now, the basic implications here.

God, according to the language then, what we've seen from holiness in principle, God, according to the language of the Old and the New Testament, is separated, set apart. Now, don't run immediately to the epistle to the Hebrews, which is written on the basis of the fact of the finished work of our Lord Jesus Christ. And the epistle invites us, let us draw near.

The Old Testament tells us to keep out. Adam and Eve were thrown out of the garden and the flaming angels kept them out. There was no way into the holy place in the tabernacle.

The way into the holy place is not yet open. God is separated in the symbolism and in the reality. Not symbolism, but cause in reality.

God is separated. Now, in what sense is God separated? Can I put it like this? If you were to look back over the entire course of human history and draw a line to divide like from unlike, on the one side of the line you would have to put all human and angelic creatures of every kind. All kinds of creatures.

We are all on the one side of the line. From the beginning of time, and it will be so to the end of time. On the other side of the line there is one solitary figure.

It's the Almighty God, the Holy One of Israel. All the pantheons of deities that men have created, they are with us. They are the creatures of the human mind, of the human spirit, of the human intellect, of the human will.

We are all together on this side of the line, the high and the low, the rich and the poor, cultured and illiterate. Here we are. We are together on this side of the line.

Who is on the other side? When you and I come to worship Him, though we gladly rejoice in the precious atoning blood of Christ and the Spirit that brings us near, let us remember you were some time afar off who have been made nigh by the blood of Christ. God is separated from us, from His world and from His people. Now, of course, I've got to bring a correction or a caution in here, and it's a very important caution.

When we say that God is separated from His world, we must not for one moment suggest that God is withdrawn from His world, that He's got no interest in it and has nothing to do with it. I cannot pursue this, but let me say this much. If God were to withdraw His interest in the world for but one solitary moment, the cosmos, the ordered universe, would immediately degenerate into a chaos.

You say there's a lot of chaos in the world today. Yes, but remember this. It is a chaos which God permits.

The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews describes our Lord Jesus Christ bearing all things, chapter 1, verse 3, bearing all things or sustaining all things by the word of His power. Now, that word sustaining is not the picture of an atlas holding up the universe, as it were, lifting it up and just holding it up and carrying it somehow lifted high. It's more than that.

The older expositors and some of the more recent ones will tell you that underlying that word is this. The whole cosmos and the whole historical process is being upheld by an omnipotent deity, plus being carried along, conveyed, led, directed through all the intricacies of night and light, of summer and winter, of all that you can think of in human life, right and wrong, black and white, success and failure. It is being carried forward through all the storms of life to its predetermined goal.

God is active in the affairs of the universe. He made it. He sustains it.

Paul quoted somebody, it wasn't himself, but he quoted someone as saying, it is in God that we live and move and have our being. We cannot breathe without him. Your next breath is in the hand of God to live.

Jesus put it even more bluntly than that. You know, oftentimes we slip over, gloss over little things. You know, Jesus said in Matthew 5, he says, he causes his sun to shine upon the just and the unjust.

Did you get that? A sun is his. Don't take it for granted. It shines.

No! He causes it to shine. And he causes the rain to fall upon the righteous and the unrighteous. He's the cause that brings it about.

He's active, you see. Even when a sparrow falls, somehow or other, in that apparently insignificant act, don't ask me now how, but he's there. He's involved in it.

I'm saying all this in order for us to qualify what we've said. God is separate from the universe, but not in the sense that he's abandoned it. The 17th, 18th century deists were altogether wrong.

You remember their view of God. They believed that God had created the universe all right, but then they said he's created it like a clock. And he's wound up the clock, and now he is withdrawn.

He's gone to take his rest somewhere until the clock works itself out. That's what we're in today. Many people believe this.

It's in many images of writers and so forth. The clock is ticking to the 11th hour. That's where they get it from, from the deists.

No, no, no, no. God did not make the universe by the clock. He sends his rain.

He causes the sun to shine. He is there when the sparrow falls and so forth. God is involved in the affairs of the universe.

Well, then, you ask me, how then can God be separate? Now, the separateness of which we speak, which is at the heart of holiness, is twofold. I'm going to speak of one. I have to do it to be fair and honest to the text of Scripture, and it may not be as familiar to you as it ought to be to all of us.

It's the second aspect that we are most familiar with. The first is what we must refer to as his transcendental majesty. Something metaphysically that belongs to the nature of God, which imparts to him sovereignty, majesty, the kind of which you don't meet anywhere.

It doesn't belong to the creature, not even to all the creatures come together as one. It is something that is exclusively God's. So the first element in God's separation, which is his holiness, is this.

It is his transcendence. That is really the best word to use. Now, God's transcendence refers to his separation from his creation in terms of elevation.

Not that he is living in a heaven that is higher than the heavens of the birds or the heavens of the constellations or higher heavens, and he is in the highest of all. That's not it. It's not elevated in terms of space or time, but in being.

There is a very important debate that has been going on in philosophical and theological circles since I was an undergraduate. And it is going on, and it is raging in some places in the United States and in Europe today. Whether the term person is related to God is adequate.

If you use the term person of the creature, is it right to use the same term of the almighty creator? There are elements that are the same because God has made us after his image. Now, I don't want to go into the intricacies of it, but the thing is, God, you see, when you use the term person of the creature, you've got to remember that when we are dealing with a creator who has received no help from any of his creatures in this matter, he is alone. When there was nothing, he started everything off, and he put the potency in everything that he made to repeat its kind.

His being, his nature, his person is something altogether different from the person of the creature. And this, of course, is exceedingly important. God is really transcendent.

I've written down here, and I don't write my notes completely, but I think I will read this to you. God's elevation in terms of his very nature of his being, he is not simply separated from his creatures in what may appear to us a significant way. Something like an archangel may be said to transcend a worm.

God transcends the most exalted archangel as far again and beyond as that same archangel transcends a worm. God is not the highest among all competitors to greatness. He stands alone.

You cannot worship God as he asks and demands and deserves to be worshipped until you see that God is alone. This aspect of the divine nature and being needs to be recognized and proclaimed. You see, we are subject to him.

We were made by him. We are inferior to him. We are dependent upon him.

We are answerable to him. And he is of an order of being quite different from anything we know. So that some of our better hymns, some of our older hymns in particular, reflect aspects of the being of God that your modern ditties don't dream about.

Listen to this. Before the hills in order stood, our earth received its frame from everlasting thou art God to endless years the same. That man's breathing and atmosphere that some of the authors of our petty little now there are good choruses of course but I'm talking of the petty ones that only repeat the same old inane thing many, many times over until you think the needle has stuck.

Here is truth gripping the man producing in the man some sense of wonder and awe and he is letting us have the benefit of it in words that are fit in the process of worship. King David, of course, had early caught this vision. Yours, O Lord, he says, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor for everything in heaven and earth is yours.

Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom by which he means the whole rule. You are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you.

You are the ruler of all things, etc., etc. 1 Chronicles 29. Now then, one aspect of the holiness of God is this.

It's difficult to use one word for it. You can bring in the word sovereignty. You can bring in the term majesty.

Transcendence, I think, is the most inclusive word but it's not a very familiar one. But it is God up there beyond our reach and our range. If we were left to ourselves to see him from close at hand.

But now there is the other aspect. God's ethical and moral excellence. God's moral purity.

God's otherness, otherness in this sphere. Now, it's the word ethics, I suppose, is the crucial one to be strictly accurate here. The word ethics comes from the same root as the word ethos.

And when we refer this to God, the ethical purity of God, what we mean is this. The purity which comes from the ethos of the divine nature. God produces his own ethos.

You'll have an atmosphere in your home, parents, children. There was an atmosphere in the home in heaven between the father and the son and the Holy Spirit. It is part of the divine nature.

It is not something that was concocted. It is part of the Godhood of God. The ethos.

And our word ethics comes from that. If it's rightly used, what it means is this. Behavior, words, actions, deeds that arise in a manner that is consistent with the ethics, with the ethos of God's own being.

Now, what do we know about it? Well, scripture has a number of things to say. I see that I'm, as usual, a bit too slow. Let me just say one or two things here.

Let me quote to you a verse which is very germane to this. Habakkuk, the prophet, in chapter 1, verse 13, says, Your eyes, he says to the Lord, are too pure to look on evil. You cannot tolerate evil.

Now, just think of that for a moment. He says about God, he says, I don't like what you're going to do. You're threatening to do certain things to our land, and I don't understand it, he says, because your eyes, I know, are too pure to look upon evil.

You see it, you know what's going on, but you can't keep on looking at it. And then he qualifies that by going beyond that. He says, you cannot tolerate.

You cannot tolerate wrong. There is a holy intolerance in God. That is, intolerance of that which is so utterly inconsistent with his nature that it can have no place in his schemes.

It is intolerance of sin. The prophet moves then from the one to the other, but let me give you another one. John, in his epistle, says, take the message that we have heard from him, that is, from the Lord Jesus Christ, and declare to you, God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all.

It's the same truth, given in a different context altogether, but it's the same truth. God is light. And you know what light does.

When you go into the light, you become aware of yourself and aware of the dirt, and maybe some blood on my face if I could see myself in the mirror. Well, you're not telling me anything anyway. You've got to overlook it now for a while.

We become aware of our blemishes in the light which is God. I must mention this. I have referred to Isaiah's trisagion, holy, holy, holy.

It is not always remembered that John, in his book of Revelation, in chapter 4, heard angelic beings, heavenly beings, attenuate using the same holy, holy, holy, but with one slight difference. Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. Isaiah then heard them say, the whole earth is full of his glory.

That's not what John heard. John heard these words, who is, that is, let me give it to you, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who is, sorry, who was, who is, and who is to come. In other words, he who is holy, holy, holy was eternally holy.

He who is holy, holy, holy refers to his unchangeable holiness in the present. And with reference to his being holy as the one to come, it means that God will never change in his holiness. God is, in other words, absolutely holy.

And he cannot and will not change. And if you and I are to know him and walk with him and have fellowship with him and be capable of enjoying him in his heaven at last, somehow or other, brothers and sisters, we've got to know something of this. Now, I have come to a point - this is an endless theme - where I think I will just mention one or two things in doing so.

Yes, I think I ought to come to this, stressing the fact that God's holiness cannot change because it would mean that he himself would change. I'll leave that there. Let me come to say this.

God's holiness is the antiseptic of the whole moral universe. Antiseptic is needed in the world today, in many areas of life. God's holiness is the antiseptic of the entire universe.

One, it is the antiseptic that guarantees the fidelity - and there's another word I'm hanging for, I can't get it - the reality, the ongoing reality of all God's attributes. It is a very remarkable thing, the holiness of God. It guarantees that not one of God's attributes will be crushed or fail to have its place in the whole.

God's holiness is the antiseptic against all influences that could possibly curb his goodness or his justice or his wrath or his mercy or whatever. So that in the plethora of God's attributes which comprise his glory, all his attributes will have their place. And holiness guarantees that because in character, in purity, he does not change.

But now it goes beyond that. God's holiness is the antiseptic that makes it impossible for him to be untrue to his promises, to fail keeping his threats, or to be deviated from the purposes which he has disclosed to lie behind the universe and behind human life. God cannot change.

God cannot deviate. And the thing above all in the nature of God that guarantees that is his holiness. So that you see even though as in the questions that were asked in the brochure other elements are brought out.

Brothers and sisters, this is the most comfortable thing that we can tell each other. We've got to come to terms with it. It is a very demanding subject.

God demands of us certain things in his holiness. But in the last resort it is because God is holy that he will not countenance from without and cannot from within change because he is holy. I will indeed close with this.

We must respond to these two aspects of the otherness of God. His transcendence requires of us not that we emulate it. Don't try and emulate that.

Don't try and be as high as God is. Don't try to be as lofty as God is. The only one that tried that was Lucifer, son of the morning star and that's the way down.

When you set yourself up as God and you argue with him and you stand in his way, my friend, you are playing with fire and so am I. The response to the transcendent majesty and sovereignty and glory of God is not to try to be like him but to be consecrated to him, to hand myself over, to give myself up, to dedicate myself to the sovereign Lord. You find that in Moses at the burning bush. You find it in Isaiah in Isaiah 6. You find it with Habakkuk.

You find it with Job. You find it with the disciples. You find it wherever you go.

But then as far as this other aspect of God's holiness is concerned is moral purity. Here we are to be like him. As he who has called you is holy in all manner of conversation.

Because of this, you see, the summons that God gave to the Israelites of old and is repeated three or four times in Leviticus from Leviticus chapter 11 on to at least chapter 21, I am holy and you've got to be holy. That is the basis upon which Peter and the Apostle Paul build, for example, in the New Testament. And Peter in 1 Peter 1 verses 14, 15, and 16 brings together the command and the demand of God from ancient Israel and he demands it again from the church of the New Testament.

It is because I am holy, you've got to be holy. Of course, Jesus said it before him. He didn't say it in the same words and we sometimes miss the thrust of it.

But he said to his children in the Sermon on the Mount, he said, you are to be perfect, he says, as your Father in heaven is perfect. Now you say, well, I can't be perfect. I can't rise to that.

You've got to look at it and work at it. And since the provisions are given us by the grace and the Spirit of God in Christ and by his word to direct us and the fellowship of the saints to inspire us, we ought to be about the business, the holy business from day to day and year to year until at last he will conclude it in his good time. I end.

We've had a little experience recently with flowers. Now, I'm not good at flowers. My wife is the florist.

And what else? We were away and had some plants and a fellow elsewhere in the building looked after them. And they were quite good. There was nothing wrong at all.

When we brought them back, they were all alive. And he'd had them in the right place in his apartment and we had switched things around in our apartment and we put them in a corner where they hadn't been before. Now they were near the window, near the light.

And then I wasn't satisfied with something else. I don't want to go into the details. It takes time.

But we switched them back to where they originally were and they were catching the morning light every morning as the sun rises. They've been completely transformed. We've got flesh blooms and they're the most beautiful things and they're coming out and we don't see them anywhere else.

Brother and sister in Christ, get on with the business of perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord. I know you can't perfect it perfectly. But one day he will come.

And when the sun comes that will manifest from the east to the west and the glory of the Lord we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is. And the light of the glory in him will bring out all that is latent in his people and that is the last touch of God on the perfection of his imperfect people. I'm sorry I've gone over the time.

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