

God Is Holy

Leviticus 11:39–47; 1 Peter 1:13–21

This is the eighth in a series of sermons on Shorter Catechism Q&A 4, “What is God? God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.” Today we consider God’s holiness. I have three points; first,

1. God is holy.

This is the uniform teaching of the Bible. The Hebrew word for *holy* occurs 117 times. The New Testament word for *holy* occurs 240 times. Clearly, holiness is an important biblical concept.

In our Old Testament text we heard God tell his covenant people: “you shall be holy; for *I am holy* . . . you shall therefore be holy, for *I am holy*.” Twice in rapid succession God says, “I am holy.” Nobody else could say that. In the book of Leviticus we find this phrase five times in all: **Leviticus 11:44–45**, “For I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves, and you shall be holy; *for I am holy*. Neither shall you defile yourselves with any creeping thing that creeps on the earth. For I am the LORD who brings you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, *for I am holy*.” **Leviticus 19:2**, “The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them: “You shall be holy, for *I the LORD your God am holy*.’”” **Leviticus 20:26**, “You shall be holy to Me, for *I the LORD am holy*, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be Mine.” In speaking of the Levitical priest, God says (**Leviticus 21:8**): “You shall consecrate him, for he offers the bread of your God. He shall be holy to you, for *I the LORD, who sanctify you, am holy*.” The phrase “*you shall be holy, for I am holy*” is obviously a huge theme in the book of Leviticus. So prominent is this theme that biblical interpreters often refer to Leviticus as the “holiness code.”

Our New Testament texts builds upon this. The apostle Peter writes: “as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but *as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am holy.’*” Here, in the space of fifteen words in the original are four occurrences of the word “holy.” This machine-gun style of writing is attention-getting. The point is this: because God himself is holy, he demands that we be holy in all our conduct; to prove his point, Peter quotes Leviticus: “Be holy, for I am holy.” Note that “be holy” is an imperative—a divine command. To follow it is to be obedient; to ignore it is to disobey and sin. There’s no getting around this: God’s will for you is that you be holy. One writer observes that this is “not a stifling and burdensome requirement”; instead, “it is the gracious

and loving call of God to His children to share in His holiness.”¹ The devil disagrees, telling us that if we devote ourselves to God, we will miss out on all the fun in life; we would be better to pursue “the pleasures of sin for a season.”² Yet it is clear that God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—enjoyed perfect, uninterrupted bliss from eternity past. Moreover, the saints’ everlasting rest in heaven is called the beatific vision, the fulfillment of the Savior’s words, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” In eternity the redeemed will behold the invisible God in the face of Jesus Christ. We will enjoy life to the fullest with him forever, experiencing his presence, basking in the light of his countenance, singing his praises with the saints of all the ages. If this sounds to you like a bore and annoyance, then you are not born again. If you’re thinking to yourself, *what, no video games?* then you are an idolator; something else besides the God of heaven is your god. With the Psalmist the Christian is compelled to say, “My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the LORD: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God.” The person born of the Holy Spirit knows that men’s hearts are restless till they find their rest in him. Amen!

God says, “You shall not profane My *holy* name, but I will be *hallowed* among the children of Israel. I am the LORD who *sanctifies* you” (Lev. 22:32). Notice the words “holy,” “hallowed,” “sanctifies.” In English, *holy* is part of a complex including *saint*, *sanctify*, *sanctified*, *consecrate*, and *hallow*. These all are translations of the same Hebrew word, שָׁדָרָה, but translating it into smooth, idiomatic English requires a variety of synonyms. As English speakers, we are grateful for faithful, understandable translations, but the variety of ways that this word is rendered mask the fact that they all are derived from the same original. To be holy is to be sanctified, consecrated, hallowed. God’s people are saints, that is, people set apart to God, holy. “Saints” is not the exclusive province of a select few, but God’s term for all his elect.

Yes, God is holy. In fact, “the Holy One of Israel” is a common name for God. Consider three instances. The Psalmist says, “With the lute I will praise You—and Your faithfulness, O my God! To You I will sing with the harp, *O Holy One of Israel*” (Ps. 71:22). “For our shield belongs to the Lord, and our king to *the Holy One of Israel*” (Ps. 89:18). “Cry out and shout, O inhabitant of Zion, for great is *the Holy One of Israel* in your midst!” (Isa. 12:6). “The Holy One of Israel” is a favorite title for God in the book of Isaiah, occurring 25 times.

The bottom line: the God of the Bible—the true God—is *holy*. But
2. What does this mean?

¹ *Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible*, note 3 on 1 Pet. 1 (Olive Tree Bible Software)

² Heb. 11:25

The basic meaning of קָדוֹשׁ is *separate, apart, sacred*; separate from human infirmity, impurity and sin.³ God is wholly *other*—in a class by himself. In ancient Greek and Roman mythology there were pantheons of gods—petty, self-centered, territorial, unreliable. These gods and goddesses were works of fiction spawned in the human mind: wishful thinking; they did not create man; rather, they themselves were creations of peoples’ overheated imaginations. They were actually nonexistent; they had no power; they could work no miracles. They were mythical, yet millions of people fervently believed in them and gave their hard-earned money to build temples to them. The men of Ephesus rioted for the honor of what they considered to be the great goddess Diana, an image of which supposedly fell down from Jupiter. For over two hours they cried out incessantly, “Great is Diana of the Ephesians, great is Diana of the Ephesians!” Even the town clerk—an apparently reasonable fellow who almost miraculously brought the violent mob under control—bought into the myth. According to him, *everybody* in the whole Mediterranean world knew that Ephesus worshiped Artemis (her Greek name), the goddess whose image fell down from Jupiter. She was the pride of Ephesus, kind of like a school mascot.

But the God of the Bible is in a class by himself—a class of one. He is the true God, in contrast to false idols. He is the great Creator, the originator of all things. He has no equal; there is no God beside him. He is holy.

There are two ideas closely associated with the biblical term *holy*: (1) moral purity and (2) right of possession (ownership). Consider the first sense: moral purity. This is evident when *holy* is contrasted with words such as “profane,” “defile” and “unclean.” In Ezekiel 22:26 God informs the prophet that “[Israel’s] priests have violated my law, and have *profaned* mine holy things: they have put no difference between the *holy* and *profane*, neither have they showed difference between the *unclean* and the *clean*, and have hid their eyes from my sabbaths, and I am *profaned* among them.” Notice the pairs “holy and profane,” “clean and unclean.” We find the same pairs in Ezekiel 44:23, “They shall teach my people the difference between the *holy* and *profane*, and cause them to discern between the *unclean* and the *clean*.” In Amos 2:7 the Lord complains: “a man and his father will go in unto the same maid, to *profane* my *holy* name.”

One author observed that “Yahweh can never coexist with evil. Though he may tolerate evil, his holiness excludes evil.”⁴ Yes, it’s true. Though God does not instantaneously punish all evil, and in his perfect wisdom permits it to grow and develop and become more acute and dangerous, in the end “the wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God.”⁵ God permits evil to grow so

³ Brown, Driver, Briggs lexicon, קָדוֹשׁ (Logos Bible Software)

⁴ *Expositors Bible Commentary*, appendix to Ps. 132 (Pocket Bible)

⁵ Ps. 9:7

that when he ultimately destroys it, his victory will be the more dramatic. Eternity will resound with the songs of the redeemed praising God for his decisive victory over evil.

The true God cannot coexist eternally with evil. As Habakkuk put it, “Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity” (Hab. 1:13). What does this mean? Surely, God *sees* everything that happens everywhere in the universe; nothing is hid from his eyes. He well knows the existence of evil and injustice in this world. He hears his saints crying out, “Lord, how long?” Yet, as Gill remarks, God “does not look upon the sins of men with pleasure and approbation; since they are contrary to his nature, repugnant to his will, and breaches of his righteous law.” God can never approve of evil.

Christians are to mirror the divine attitude. Do the books we read, the movies we watch, the songs we listen to, glorify and glamorize evil, or is evil shown with disapproval? The Christian mind must always keep evil in perspective: God allows it for now, but in the end it will be vanquished and destroyed. The curse will be lifted. No evil will spoil heaven.

But *holy* has a second sense: right of possession or right of ownership. God tells his people, “You shall be holy to Me, for *I the LORD am holy*, and have separated you from the peoples, *that you should be Mine*” (Lev. 20:26). If you belong to Christ, then your life is not your own; you do not belong to yourself but belong to him who loved you and gave himself for you. This is contrary to the American ethos, the characteristic spirit of American culture. The American psyche thrills to the idea of the self-made man who works hard and takes risks and builds a large, successful empire and makes a name for himself. If you ask the average American if anybody owns him, he would say, “Of course not; the idea is preposterous.” Many successful people think this way, never stopping to consider the tremendous gifts given them by a beneficent God: their health, physical and mental strength, their sanity, and all the advantages of being born in a land described by the phrase “God shed his grace on thee.” There is *no* self-made man; all of us are the recipients of manifold blessings too numerous to number. The reprobate do not see this; they are spiritually blind, clueless as to the truth of God’s word. But the elect intuitively understand, because they are taught by God. For them, the uniform message of the Bible resonates in their heart: “For you are a holy people to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people *for Himself*, a special treasure above all the peoples who are on the face of the earth” (Deut. 14:2). Yes, dear saints! Since we belong to Christ, he promises to keep us forever and bring us unfaillingly into his heavenly kingdom.

Paul writes, “Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are

God's" (1 Cor. 6:19–20). Do not miss this: if you are trusting in Christ alone for your salvation, your body and human spirit belong to God. You are not your own. God has brought you to himself to be his worshiper, to enter into a love-relationship with him, to know his heart. This is a high privilege indeed! The man or woman dead in trespasses and sins doesn't want anything to do with a God like that. Such a person is convinced it would take all the fun out of life—but that's the devil's lie. Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more *abundantly*" (John 10:10). A life in fellowship with Christ is the best and most satisfying life there is.

And here's a beautiful truth: right of possession or ownership goes both ways. Just as in a Christian marriage, where the husband and wife voluntarily give themselves to one another "till death do us part," so God willingly gives himself to his elect people, and his elect willingly offer themselves to God. Biblically, it is *mutual* belonging: "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine" (Song 6:3). The "beloved" is the bride: Christ's church. "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the *church* and gave Himself for her" (Eph. 5:25). "Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:9). "I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2). An angel invites: "Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife" (Rev. 21:9).

God is holy. He is separate from evil and overrules it for his own glory. He is morally pure. He is wholly other—in a class by himself. He claims us as his own and gives himself to his people as the lover of our souls! That brings me to my third point,

3. Called to be holy

Not only is God himself holy, he also wants us, his people, to be holy. Yes, the Lord wants you and me to be holy! What does this look like?

In some circles the idea of holiness is reduced to a list of dos and don'ts: specific "sins" to be avoided. Often, the commands of men replace the authoritative word of God: women must not wear lipstick, gold jewelry or slacks; they must never cut their hair but wear it up in a bun; in certain congregations families are not allowed to have TV sets. Now some of these man-made rules may be well-intended; there might be an element of truth in them. Who could argue that the typical Christian spends far too much time glued to electronic devices? This is in contradiction to the Lord's injunction "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10). How much time does the average Christian spend being still and meditating upon God? Precious little!

Our church is committed to the truth that God alone is Lord of the conscience, that church authority is limited; it is only ministerial and declarative. The church has divine authority only to preach and teach the whole counsel of God revealed in

Holy Scripture. The church must preach and teach everything that's *in* the Bible, and nothing that's *not* in the Bible. Human opinion must be tested by holy Scripture. What the church needs to hear is "Thus saith the Lord." When God's word declares something to be sin, then it is sin.

With regard to clothing, the Bible declares that men should not wear women's clothing, and women should not wear men's clothing. God's word is very clear on this: "The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the LORD thy God" (Deut. 22:5). Let there be no equivocation: men dressing up like "drag queens" is an abomination to the Lord. A Christian should have nothing to do with such immoral behavior. We should not send our children to schools or libraries that permit such abominations. Christian presidents should not appoint cross-dressers to positions of authority.

God also requires that men and women dress in *modest* apparel (1 Tim. 2:9). To dress immodestly or suggestively is sin. Moreover, God gives his people his Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth, to understand how this requirement is to be applied.

We see this in our Old Testament text today. This chapter contains ceremonial laws that were binding on Old Testament Israel, but it also gives moral principles that are for all time. Israel was to be a distinct people, separate from the nations. God's people were not to try to blend in and conform to idolaters. They were to be distinct: a peculiar people—not peculiar in the sense of being weird, but in the sense of totally devoted to God. All Christians, not just a few with special callings, are to be totally devoted to God. Some people associate devotion to God with monks or nuns wearing rough fabrics like burlap. But holiness at its root is a heart attitude—total commitment to the God of heaven. Peter says, "Do not let your adornment be merely outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel—rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God" (1 Pet. 3:3–4). Sanctification is consecrating oneself to the Lord, becoming holy, set apart to the Lord, presenting our bodies as living sacrifices to the Lord.

God finds fault with his people when they are not sanctified. He says, "Her priests have violated my law, and have profaned mine holy things: they have put no difference between the holy and profane, neither have they showed difference between the unclean and the clean, and have hid their eyes from my sabbaths, and I am profaned among them" (Ezek. 22:26).

Christian, are you committed to moral purity? Do you desire to live your life every moment in a manner that pleases God? When you sin, you grieve the Holy Spirit of God. Does your sin grieve you too? Do you flee to Christ for cleansing? Are you quick to confess your faults and put off your old sinful habits, or do you nurture them and hang onto them, waiting for a fresh opportunity to sin?

Understanding that God is holy motivates us to worship. The church's worship is a response to hearing God's voice in the preaching of his word. The Christian should never hear the truth of God and be unaffected. When we hear God's truth we should say, "Amen, Lord." In response to a fresh understanding of holiness the Psalmist prays, "But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel" (Ps. 22:3). The church praises the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for his holiness. His holiness should be a matter of our constant praise.

Christian, are you truly thankful that God is holy? Does your soul long for holiness—conformity with the divine nature? God's standard is absolute perfection. No Christian will fully measure up to this till Christ returns, or we close our eyes in death. This is why we need the gospel: Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again the third day for our justification. The gospel is not about what *we do* but about what *Christ did*. Our salvation is complete in Christ.

"Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him *purifieth* himself, even as he is *pure*."⁶ Amen.

⁶ 1 John 3:2-3