

THEISM

Be Holy, For God is Holy

God's holiness may well be the attribute, more than any other, which God wants his people to recognize about himself. God's holiness is the basis for his requiring that his people live with separateness and cleanliness toward him. After the Israelites came out of Egypt, while they were yet at Mt. Sinai, God gave ordinances requiring their removal from every unclean thing. Then he said, "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 11:44-45). The Apostle Peter referred to this in the New Testament when he exhorted, "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'" (1 Peter 1:15-16).

God's holiness seems to have been the most prominent character feature presented in visions to people. God's holiness was evident to Abraham (Genesis 15), to Moses (Exodus 3:1-4:23), to Job (Job 38-41), to Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-13), etc. Isaiah was so impressed with God's holiness that at least twenty-seven times he spoke of God as "the Holy One" (Isaiah 1:4; 5:19; 24:10:20; 12:6; 17:7; 29:19, 23; 30:11-12, 15; 31:1; 37:23; 40:25; 41:14, 16, 20; 43:3, 14; 45:11; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7; 54:5; 55:5; 20:9, 14).

The word "holy" relates to two things. First, it relates to that which is set apart. Thus, a vessel, a place, a house, a land, a city, a book, a covenant, etc. may be said to be holy because it is set apart to and for God. In this sense, the word "holy" has to do with the fact that a person or a thing is separate in existence, not that it has any particular quality of moral goodness or behavior. To say that God is holy is therefore to say that God is separate from all else. God alone is holy (Revelation 15:4). He is unique! "No one is holy like the LORD, For there is none besides You" (1 Samuel 2:2). Everything about God is holy, i.e., set apart, distinctive. His name is holy (1 Chronicles 16:10, 35; 29:16; Psalms 30:4; 33:21; 97:12; 103:1; 105:3; 106:47; 145:21). His words are holy (Psalms 60:6, Jeremiah 23:9). His works are holy (Psalms 145:17). His throne is holy (Psalms 47:8). His temple is holy (1 Corinthians 3:17). Moreover, to say that people are holy (Deuteronomy 7:6; 14:2, 21; 26:19; 28:9; Isaiah 62:12; 63:18; Daniel 8:24; 12:7) is to say, first of all, that they are distinct in that they are set apart to and for God. They belong to God.

Second, the word "holy" relates to behavior. "Holy" is the term that best describes God's behavior. God is "glorious in holiness" (Exodus 15:11; Habakkuk 3:3). God's holiness is described in two ways. One way is positive in the sense of absolute goodness. The other way is negative in the sense of abstinence from all evil. In the positive sense, God is absolutely truthful (2 Samuel 7:28; Jeremiah 10:10; John 3:33; 17:3; 1 Thessalonians 1:9; 1 John 5:20; Revelation 15:3; 16:7; 19:9, 11). He is faithful (Hosea 11:12; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 10:3; 2 Corinthians 1:18). The Holy one is a redeemer (Isaiah 41:14; 43:14; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7; 54:5). In the negative sense, God's conduct is absolutely sinless (1 John 3:9). God abhors iniquity. "You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness" (Habakkuk 1:13). God cannot be tempted to sin (James 1:13). God cannot tell a lie (Titus 1:2, Hebrews 6:18).

For people to be holy in their behavior requires that they be like God. The requirement for people to be holy is also described in two ways. Moses noted the positive when he admonished,

“You shall therefore consecrate yourselves.” And he noted the negative by saying, “Neither shall you defile yourselves” (Leviticus 11:44-45). Peter noted the positive sense of holy conduct when he designated God’s people “as obedient children.” He described the negative sense of holy behavior when he said, “not conforming yourselves to the former lusts” (1 Peter 1:15-16). Other scriptures also declare both positive and negative aspects of how God’s people should behave. For example, Romans 12:1-2, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” Again, James 1:27, “Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.” (Other scriptures indicating both positive and negative aspects of ideal Christian behavior are Ephesians 4:17-32; Colossians 3:5-17, etc.)

However, no human being can be either absolutely good or totally free from sin. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23) “There is none righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10). Isaiah declared that “your iniquities have separated you from your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear” (Isaiah 59:2). Unlike God, people yield to sinful temptations, are sometimes unfaithful and untrustworthy, and are not always truthful. People cannot stand in the presence of the Holy One on their own merits.

Therefore, in order for sinful humanity to be sinless in the presence of the Holy God, some means of propitiation or appeasement is required. Under the Old Covenant, propitiation was made available by the shedding of animal blood sacrifices (Leviticus 16:2-33; Hebrews 9:22) that were renewed annually (Leviticus 16:34; Hebrews 9:25; 10:3). Under the New Covenant, propitiation was made available to believers once for all time (Hebrews 9:28; 10:10, 14) by God when he gave his only begotten son (John 3:16) to die on the cross (Ephesians 2:16; Philippians 2:8) to shed his blood (Romans 3:25; 5:9; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14) for the sins of humanity (1 Corinthians 15:3; Galatians 1:4; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). The Holy God thereby made it possible for believers to stand in his presence acquitted of all sin (Romans 3:24; 5:1, 9; 6:18, 22).

Even so, God requires that the redeemed stand before him in holiness. That is, he requires his people to be separated to and for him. When one commits his life to God, turns away from a sinful life, and has his sins washed away, he is not only justified, but also sanctified, i.e., made holy (1 Corinthians 6:11; Hebrews 10:10, 14). Righteous behavior is equated with holy living because people are set apart to live righteously like God. Paul exhorted the Romans to “present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness” (Romans 6:19). Although sanctification cannot be achieved by one’s own efforts, believers are instructed to “cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Corinthians 7:1).

In the Old Testament, God’s holy behavioral requirements for his people are indicated by the Law of Moses – including the Ten Commandments (with its moral categories), the priesthood, the Tabernacle (with holy and most holy places), etc. All these described the right way, as opposed to a wrong way, to live. When the Old Covenant was annulled (Hebrews 8:7-13; Jeremiah 31:31-34), the New Covenant became the standard indicating God’s behavioral requirements for human sanctification. These behavioral requirements for the sanctified life are set forth in the twenty-seven documents of the New Testament.