

## **The Holiness of God: Holiness Defined** **Leviticus 22:31-33; Matthew 6:9-13**

Do you know what the word *holy* means?

### **Holy - That Which is Different**

*Holy* is often used as a synonym for moral purity or righteousness. There's nothing wrong with that, but it is a little misleading. In the Scriptures, there is one primary meaning and one secondary meaning of the term *holy*. The secondary meaning is that which refers to personal righteousness and purity. However, the primary meaning of the word is "separate." That which is holy is that which is other—that which is different from something else.

The primary thrust of holiness is in reference to God's transcendence, to His magnificence, to that sense in which God is higher and superior to anything there is in creation. Again, that which is holy is that which is different.

In the Bible, not only is God described as holy, but holy is used to describe the Holy Spirit or the Holy One of Israel. We hear about holy ground, holy vessels, and holy moments. Anthropologists and sociologists have studied human experience and noticed that all people have some sense of holy time and holy space. All of us have or have had a special place that we frequent when life got tough. That place took on a special significance. Every year there's one special day, your birthday, when you celebrate a moment in time that has a special importance to you. And during the year, we celebrate holidays: "holiday" means a "holy day." It's a day that is different from the ordinary days. It's special. It's set apart for a particular kind of remembrance. Sacred space, sacred time, and sacred things are all a part of our lives.

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we use common elements like bread and wine or juice. And yet, we often refer the Lord's Supper as Holy Communion. Why is that? And what about other events or places or things in the Bible that are described as "holy?"

It's not because of the intrinsic value of these objects.

What makes something sacred—what makes something holy—is the touch of God upon it. When the One who is Himself other and different touches that which is ordinary, it becomes extraordinary. When He touches you, you become uncommon. The difference between the profane and the holy is the difference between the common and the uncommon, between the earthly and the heavenly.

### **The *Mysterium Tremendum***

Some of us suffer from a phobia. A phobia is nothing more than being afraid of something. Xenophobia is the fear of strangers or foreigners. We tend to be frightened by people whose customs are different from ours. The supreme form of xenophobia that we have is our fear of the living God, because He is so different from us. He is high and exalted.

Rudolf Otto - *The Idea of the Holy*. Otto examined people from different cultures and tried to find out what they regarded as holy or sacred in their culture. Then he studied the human encounters of the holy to see what the normal human reactions are to the holy. After making this study, he tried to distill the essence of human experience of the holy. What is the holy? His answer: *mysterium tremendum*.

The *mysterium tremendum* is the experience we have of the holy is an experience of something very strange, impossible to penetrate or fathom. It is mysterious, but it is also powerful. This awesome, mysterious power provokes a sense of fear within us.

Everybody here has had those moments of awareness of the presence of God. They're not part of our ordinary, daily experience. Ordinary experience is basically profane. We're not flooded every second in our soul with this

acute sense of the presence of God, and yet every Christian knows what it means to have that precious moment. But it's fleeting.

### **Holiness Fascinates and Terrifies**

Otto continues that not everybody responds in the same way to awareness of the holy. Some people become whirling dervishes in all kinds of flamboyant activity. Other people are moved to absolute silence and contemplation. This is what happens when someone tells a ghost story or rides certain in an amusement park.

### **The Inner Sanctum**

In the 1940's there was a radio drama called *Inner Sanctum*. The opening to the program probably had everyone scared even before the drama started. The term *inner sanctum* means "within the holy."

The marketing geniuses of this program discovered that the most terrifying thing they could expose people to was a program about the holy.

That is why we tend to keep our distance—a safe distance—from the character of God, because even though we're attracted to it on the one hand, on the other we are repelled by it. Yet it is this element that we fear which is at the very core of the character of God

### **Holy Is His Name**

The Lord's Prayer is divided into three parts: the formal address, the petitions, and the closing.

What is the first petition of the prayer? "Hallowed be Your name" is the first petition.

Jesus is saying, "When you pray, the first thing I want you to pray is that the name of God would be treated as sacred, as holy." The Bible says of God, "Holy is His name."

If God's name is not held in high esteem in a society, if holy God is not reverend and worshiped in a culture, what chance does humanity have at being treated with dignity and honor as one who is made in the image of holy God? If God's name is not safe, how can any of us be safe?

### **What God Will Not Tolerate**

Jesus is essentially saying in the Lord's Prayer: "I want you to pray that my Father's name would be regarded as holy. Then I want you to say, 'Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth even as it is in heaven.' So, what I want my people to be praying for is that My reign, My sovereignty, My authority as King will be honored and recognized in this world. Pray that people will do My will on this planet, even as the angels in heaven right now obey My will."

There seems to be a logical progression here. The Kingdom of God will ever come on this earth, or that the will of God will ever be done on this earth, *until or unless the name of God is revered by His people*. How is it possible for people to honor a king, and at the same time desecrate His name? If we have a cavalier, casual attitude toward the name of God, that reveals our deepest attitude toward the God of the name than anything else we say.

If you use the name of God as a common curse word, you are, at root, a profane person. You have no respect for the holiness of God. God will not tolerate the desecration of His name. He put it in the Ten Commandments. Jesus says that you are to pray that the name of God would be holy—that it would be treated as different, as special, as extraordinary, as exalted. Why? Because He is different, special, and exalted.

When we are called to be holy; we are called to be different. We are called to bear witness to the style that one finds in God, a style driven by the second meaning of holiness, which is righteousness. When God says, "Be holy for I am holy," He is saying: "Be different from the normal standards of this world. I want you to express and show what righteousness is in this land." This is the task of the Christian—to mirror and reflect the character of God to a dying world.