

God's Holiness and Your Worship

Scripture: Psalm 96:2–6

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What is the first thing that comes to mind when you worship God? Is it His infinite wisdom, His unlimited power, or His ultimate sovereignty? Is it some attribute or characteristic you find particularly appealing, awe-inspiring, or comforting?

Knowing that God is immutable, omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient is significant, but those attributes give limited insight into what God expects *of us*. What is it—beyond His unchanging, all-powerful, infinitely knowing presence—that compels us to worship?

It is basically this: God is holy. Of all the attributes of God, holiness is the one that most uniquely describes Him and in reality is a summation of all His other attributes. The word *holiness* refers to His separateness, His otherness, the fact that He is unlike any other being. It indicates His complete and infinite perfection. Holiness is the attribute of God that binds all the others together. Properly understood, it will revolutionize the quality of our worship.

When they exalted God, the angels didn't say, "Eternal, Eternal, Eternal,"; they didn't say, "Faithful, Faithful, Faithful,"; "Wise, Wise, Wise"; or "Mighty, Mighty, Mighty." They said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God, the Almighty" (Revelation 4:8). His holiness is the crown of all that He is.

Exodus 15:11 asks, "Who is like You among the gods, O Lord? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, awesome in praises, working wonders?" The answer, of course, is that no being is equal to God in holiness. In fact, holiness is so uniquely and exclusively an attribute of God that Psalm 111:9 says, "Holy and awesome is His name." That doesn't merely mean that the name of God is sacred and sanctified; it means holiness is so much the essence of God's character that *Holy* is one of the names God goes by.

The Standard of Absolute Holiness

God doesn't conform to a holy standard; He *is* the standard. He never does anything wrong, He never errs, He never makes a misjudgment, He never causes something to happen that isn't right. There are no degrees to His holiness. He is holy, flawless, without error, without sin, fully righteous—utterly, absolutely, infinitely holy.

To dwell in God's presence, one must be holy. That was demonstrated when the angels sinned. God immediately cast them out and prepared a place for them separated from His presence. When sinful humans choose not to come to God, when they choose to reject Jesus Christ, their ultimate end is to be sent to the place prepared for the devil and his angels, out of the presence of God.

Hebrews 12:14 clearly states that apart from holiness, no one will see the Lord. The problem for us is that God's standard of holiness is absolute perfection. His own unblemished holiness is the ultimate criterion by which we are judged. Peter articulated that truth when he wrote: "It is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:16). Jesus said the same thing: "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

This presents a seemingly impassible barrier for fallen humanity, because we have all sinned. We are fatally blemished by our own sinfulness. What God requires of us, we simply cannot attain on our own. Indeed, our very nature is tainted to the core with sin. Sinfulness has corrupted every aspect of our mind, our hearts, and our wills. We *cannot* be perfect; we are already deeply imperfect—seriously and indelibly corrupted with evil desires, evil motives, evil thoughts, and evil deeds. We thus have no hope whatsoever of ever obtaining for ourselves the perfect holiness God requires.

Holiness and Imputation

But God's plan of salvation solves that whole dilemma in a remarkable and multifaceted way. God's own perfect righteousness is imputed—or put to the account of—every sinner who believes in Jesus Christ. Just as Christ took our sin and paid for it, we get credit for His righteousness and are rewarded for it. "[God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Authentic faith therefore entails shedding every pretense of our own righteousness and confessing that we are hopeless sinners. In fact, even the most fastidious attempts to earn merit of our own count for nothing in God's sight. Our very best, most charitable human works are all deeply flawed because of our sinfulness. They are like garbage in God's holy estimation. But He imputes His own perfect righteousness to those who repent of their self-righteousness and trust Christ as Lord and Savior (see Philippians 3:8-9). That gives us an immediate right standing before God: "Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God" (Romans 5:1-2). "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

Having already justified us and clothed us in a garment of perfect righteousness (not one of our own making, but Christ's righteousness imputed to us), God is now conforming us to greater and greater Christlikeness, thus making us fit for heaven. When we die, or when Christ returns, that process will be instantly completed in our glorification (Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 1 John 3:2).

That is why we speak of God's holiness as one of His *communicable* attributes—one of the perfections of God that His creatures can, to some degree, share and participate in. God conforms us to the perfection of His own holy standard. He instantly gives us a righteous standing, and then over time He makes us perfectly holy. That is a fair summary of what God does for us in salvation.

Holiness and Hating Sin

God's holiness is best seen in His hatred of sin. God cannot tolerate sin; He is totally removed from it. Amos 5:21–23 records God's strong words to those attempting to worship Him while polluted with

sin:

I hate, I reject your festivals, nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; And I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps.

That does not mean that God hates sacrifices and offerings and festivals and music as a *means* of worship. God desires all those things, because He instituted them. Rather, the point is God hates *any* kind of worship that is tainted with sin.

God doesn't want you to sin, even if it would make your testimony more exciting, or display His grace to a greater degree (Romans 6:1-2). He never approves sin. He will not necessarily keep you from sinning, and He may even use your sin to further His own wise and holy purposes. But He does not ever sanction or condone sin, and even when someone's sin helps fulfill the outworking of God's eternal plan, it is always the creature, not God, who is the agent responsible for sin. God never actively tempts or entices anyone to sin, and He Himself cannot be tempted to sin (James 1:13). Sin is the object of His displeasure. God loves holiness. Psalm 11:7 says, "For the Lord is righteous, He loves righteousness."

Worship the Lord in the Beauty of Holiness

Acknowledging and understanding the Lord's utter holiness is essential to true worship. Psalm 96:2–6 exhorts us to:

Sing to the Lord, bless His name;
Proclaim good tidings of His salvation from day to day.
Tell of His glory among the nations,
His wonderful deeds among all the peoples.
For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised;
He is to be feared above all gods.
For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
But the Lord made the heavens.
Splendor and majesty are before Him,
Strength and beauty are in His sanctuary.

That describes acts of worship. Verse 9 makes the key statement: "Worship the Lord in holy attire; tremble before Him, all the earth." *Holy attire* means the spiritual clothing of holiness. *Tremble before Him* implies fear. In fact, the King James Version translates that verse, "O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness: fear before him, all the earth."

Here we are introduced to the frequent biblical connection of the idea of God's holiness with fear on the part of the worshiper. It is a fear that grows out of an overwhelming sense of unworthiness in the presence of pure holiness. Next time we'll consider why that fear is appropriate, and why it's missing from much of what passes for worship today.



(Adapted from [*Worship: The Ultimate Priority*](#).)

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