

The Holiness of God
Revelation 4:1-11
July 15, 2012

based on "God: As He Longs for You to See Him" by Chip Ingram

What comes into your mind when you hear or think the word *holy*? Do you picture monks and candles, long flowing robes and big Bibles? Do you think of women without make-up and men dressed in blue and black clothes with snaps instead of buttons?

Truth is, unless we understand what God's holiness is we will never understand how we should be holy. Whether or not you have ever tried to define holiness, on some level you have a concept of what you think holiness means. Our goal today is to bring your concept of holiness closer to God's concept of holiness.

Let's start with some dictionary definitions of *holy*:

- ! dedicated to religious use; belonging to or coming from God; consecrated; sacred.
- ! spiritually perfect or pure; untainted by evil or sin; sinless; saintly.
- ! regarded with or deserving deep respect, awe, reverence, or adoration.
- ! to set apart from all else.

Since this is what holy means, it's safe to say that to be holy is the opposite of being profane, common, or ordinary. The English roots of the word *holy* refer to things that are healthy, happy, sound, complete, unspoiled.

When you talk about God's holiness, you are speaking about that which divides God from everyone else and everything else. You are speaking of a quality of awesome mystery that exists within God. You are speaking of his unique nature that makes him different from any other thing or person in the entire universe.

This uniqueness is pointed out in the song Moses wrote after the Israelites had been freed from their Egyptian taskmasters. In response to all the miracles God had performed as he rescued his people, Moses asks, "*Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you – majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?*" (Ex 15:11).

Moses says that God's holiness is majestic – the Hebrew literally means expanded. God's holiness isn't just what we think it to be, it's a thousand times beyond anything we could ever conceive as holy. God isn't just ten or one hundred or one thousand times more holy than the holiest person you know. God is in a category by himself.

There is an "otherness" about God that makes him above all evil. God's holiness makes him sole possessor of all that is pure, whole, righteous, and healthy. God is holy. God is other. All that we know of life, purity, goodness, peace, and beauty radiates from God's holiness.

This brings up two questions for us to consider today. How does God reveal his holiness so you and I, with our limited capacities, can grasp it? How can you and I effectively reflect God's holiness in our particular part of this world?

A word of caution: Investigating God's holiness isn't just another academic venture. Exposure to God's holiness must have a reflection in your life. As soon as a Christian gets even a meager glimpse of God's holiness, he hears St Peter saying, "*Do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy'*" (1 Pet 1:14-16). With that in mind, let's look at the seven ways God reveals his holiness to us.

God reveals his holiness through **his people**. Moses, David, and Isaiah are three good examples.

God came to Moses in a burning bush that didn't burn up. The first thing that God says to Moses is "*Don't come any closer. Take off your shoes because you are standing on holy ground*" (Ex 3:5). The moment before God came, that portion of the desert was just ordinary sand – but now it was holy ground.

The difference was the presence of God. God is present at all places at all times, but this presence was different. God confronted Moses with his personal presence. When the presence of God is a real presence, we should be moved to awe and reverence, silence and worship.

David is often called a man after God's own heart. Nevertheless, God revealed himself through David in such a way as to say, "*I am a just God.*" God kept his promise to make David king and his promise that one of David's descendants would rule forever – that descendant is Jesus Christ. God also brought appropriate punishment for King David's indiscretions. David's adultery cost him his firstborn son. God's holiness insures his justice as well as his grace and love.

Isaiah represents what happens when someone gets even a small glimpse of God's holiness. Isaiah asked God for a message he could give the people. Instead of a message, Isaiah received a vision that left him totally awestruck. Isaiah saw the glory of God fill the Temple and he heard the angels crying, "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord, God Almighty.*"

(Isaiah chapter six says the train of God's robe filled the Temple. In those days, the importance of a king determined the length of the train of his robe. A short train was for a minor king. A long train was for a major king. The train of God's robe filled the Temple!)

When Isaiah was confronted by God's holiness, he was exposed for exactly whom he was. Isaiah may have been one of God's prophets, but he was still a sinful man. Listen to Isaiah's reaction to being confronted by God's holiness, "*Woe to me!*" I cried. "*I am*

ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty” (Is 6:5).

When we see God for who he really is and we stop trying to see him as we want him to be, we can't help but see how pitiful we are. That's why we need to understand God's goodness before we try to understand his holiness. The terror that comes from knowing God sees all of our sins and shortcomings is put to rest by the knowledge that God not only loves us just as we are he also loves us enough to not let us stay that way.

God also reveals his holiness through **places**. When God reveals himself in a place that place becomes holy. Such is the case with Moses and the burning bush, the tent of the tabernacle, Solomon's Temple. These ordinary places became extraordinary places because they hosted the presence of God.

If you read the 4th chapter of Acts, you find a story of the disciples praying and thanking God. They were thanking God for the privilege of suffering for the sake of the Gospel. The Holy Spirit descended on that meeting and the building began to shake and tremble.

There are places today that we designate as holy. We feel the presence of God in these places. But the holiest place on earth is just a minor reflection of the holiest place of all – the holy land of heaven. The presence of God transforms any place into a place of holiness, be it a temple or a desert.

God reveals his holiness through **the Law**. The first three Commandments require us to have no other gods, not to profane the name of God, and to respect a day of Sabbath to honor God. These commandments are designed to keep us mindful of God's holiness.

The holiness of God's Law also shows itself in the fact that God's laws are good for us. The Old Testament food restrictions protected the Israelites from diseases and parasites they didn't even know existed. God designed his Law with such care that a recent medical study revealed the odd fact that the blood of newborn boys reaches a particularly high clotting factor on the eighth day after birth.

God's Law is still protecting those who obey it. What would happen to sexually transmitted diseases if everyone obeyed the 6th Commandment and avoided all sexual contact outside of marriage? What would happen if no one lied, no one stole, no one hated? Obeying God's Law, all of God's Law, has always been good for mankind.

God's holiness is revealed through **his prophets**. God has always had a group of chosen representatives. God not only reveals his holiness to his prophets, he reveals his holiness through his prophets. Whether it's the prophets of old or the pastors of today, the job of God's representatives is a simple one: Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

God's representatives demonstrate God's holiness when they bring the healing Word of God to the troubled soul of a repentant sinner. They also demonstrate God's holiness when they reprimand God's people for putting their trust in other gods; money, job, social standing, political clout, religious traditions and trappings.

God reveals his holiness through **his wrath and judgment**. God is patient and longsuffering. However, when his people refuse to listen, God's holiness demands retribution. Unwillingness to live within the bounds of God's will can damage or destroy the things that God has created and loves. The judgments we read about in the Bible tell how God guards and enforces his holiness.

The story of Achan tells how he disobeyed God's order that no one take any goods from the city of Jericho – everything was to be destroyed. Achan took some silver and other things thinking he could sidestep God. Achan's disdain for God's holiness cost his life and the lives of his family.

In the New Testament, Ananias and Sapphira mocked God by claiming to give more than they actually did. The story is available in Acts chapter five. They both paid with their lives for treating God's holiness as common.

God loves us so much that when we defy the boundaries of his holiness, he will go to any length to bring us back in line. Not because he is mean and nasty, but because our happiness is rooted in our appreciation of his holiness.

God reveals his holiness through **Jesus Christ**. From start to finish, Jesus' earthly life proclaimed the holiness of God. The miracles, the upright life, loving the unlovable, accepting the outcast all spoke volumes about God's holiness.

God's holiness in Christ moved him to offer himself in our place. When we see Christ on the cross, when we hear Jesus cry, "*My God, my God why have you forsaken me?*" (Matt 27:46) we can see the depth of God's holiness. The holy judgment brought down on Christ was meant for us. God's holiness is so appalled by sin that only he could pay the price of sin – and he did – for us. He did it all so we might have a relationship with a holy God.

The last way God reveals his holiness is through **his church**. This doesn't make sense to our way of thinking. God wants to reveal his holiness through less than holy people. But that's the way God has chosen. God expects his church on earth to be a reflection of his holiness for all the world to see.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3:16: "*Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?*" The *you* in this verse is plural. Paul is speaking to the assembled believers at the church in Corinth. He explains that God inhabits his earthly church and we have already seen that anywhere God is present is holy. So God places his holiness on the assembled earthly church – big church, little church, any gathering of true believers.

If you go a little farther in Paul's letter, you'll find this further refining of how God's holiness inhabits his church. "*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.*" (1 Cor 6:19). God not only inhabits the church he also, through the Holy Spirit, inhabits every Christian. God expects this holiness to shine out from every believer.

This last demonstration of God's holiness leads us to ask, "How should I respond to God's holiness?" In order to have a proper response to God's holiness, our response must be four things:

- ! It's a commitment we make.
- ! It's a way we think.
- ! It's a command we obey.
- ! It's an attitude we develop.

Holiness isn't something that will just come raining down on us. For us to live a life of response to God's holiness requires a **commitment**. Hebrews 12:14 says, "*Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.*" That sounds like a commitment to me.

It also raises some interesting questions. Are you making every effort to be at peace with everyone around you and to live a holy life? Are you giving the same kind of effort to living a holy life as you are to being a good parent, a good marriage partner, or a good friend? Are you giving the same effort to being a holy Christian as you are to earning a living?

A proper response to holiness also requires a **certain way of thinking**. As Scripture so aptly puts it, responding to God's holiness means we must stop living in sin and start living in God's will. More specifically, we must not read certain books, watch certain movies, talk certain ways, engage in certain activities. Our lives must be made up of pure actions powered by pure motives.

Too often we try to play a game with God. We try to see how close we can come to sinning without really sinning. We want to get as close as we can to the edge of the pit without falling in. But I have bad news for you. The game itself is a sin. It shows we don't truly want to leave sin and follow God. God never accepts compromises. Responding to God's holiness means when in doubt don't. Turn around and walk away.

Response to God's holiness is a **command we obey**. St Peter writes, "*But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'*" (1 Pet 1:15-16). The command to be as holy as God sets up a compelling standard. It means that we must strive for personal holiness in everything we say and do. There is no room for part-time holiness. This means turning our lives over completely to God and giving God permission to do as he pleases with us. We must surrender everything to God and worship God alone.

Responding to God's holiness is **an attitude we develop**. The book of Proverbs tells us, "*To fear the Lord is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech.*" (Prov 8:13).

The attitude of holiness isn't a "holier-than-thou" attitude. It's a gut-level hatred of everything that is evil. This isn't a popular attitude in our time of tolerance, extreme individualism, and rampant immorality. The attitude of holiness hates all sin while offering love to the sinner. It requires the Christian to live in this world in order to carry the Gospel to the lost and, at the same time, separate himself from the sins the world so loves to indulge in.

God longs for you to see his holiness. God longs for you to mirror his holiness in your everyday life. All our desires of intimacy, love, fulfillment, and satisfaction are found in their purest forms in the holiness of God. All of the good things in life are wrapped in God's holiness.