

Attributes of God 3 – Holiness

Reading: 1 Peter 1:16 “.... *Be holy, for I am holy* ¹”

Introduction:

This is the third lesson in the series, “Attributes of God”. In the first lesson, we saw that God is Spirit – He is invisible, although we can see His handiwork in the world around us, and the changes He makes in people’s lives. In the second lesson, we looked at God’s relationship with mankind – that mankind was a distinctly special part of God’s creation – created in the image of God – and that God has always had an ongoing care for us, both physically and spiritually.

In this lesson, we will look at the holiness of God.

LESSON

1) The term “*holy*” used in the sense of “*being separate, set apart*”

The word “*holy*” is used in two different ways in the scriptures. In the first sense, it is used to indicate that something has been set aside for special significance – the “something” is in a class of its own.

- the word “*sanctified*” also conveys this idea of “*being set apart*”.

This idea of things being holy by being separate or being set aside is found in various ways in the scriptures. In the Biblical context, it was (and is) in regard to God Himself, His people, and to things relating to our obedience and worship of God.

a) Physical objects

In the Old Testament, we see several occasions where physical objects are deemed by God to be holy. For example;

- i) The Sabbath day was holy (**Exodus 20:8-11**). From a scientific aspect, the seventh day is no different to any other day. The sun rises in the east and sets in the west like any other day. It is 24 hours long, just like any other day. But God made it holy by making it separate to the other six days of the week – it was to be a day of rest, just as He had rested on the seventh day.
- ii) The ground near the burning bush in Horeb (Sinai) was holy (**Exodus 3:5**). As far as we know, there was nothing physically different with the soil in this spot to the surrounding area. Moses could wear his sandals everywhere else, but not here. This was special ground, a place set aside, separate to the rest of the area. It was holy ground, because God was there (in the burning bush).
- iii) Articles in the Temple, such as the ark, the altar and lampstands (**Exodus 25:10-40; 27:8; 29:37; 1 Kings 8:4**), and the clothes worn by Aaron and the priests (**Exodus 28:1-43**) were to be considered holy. These items were made from minerals and materials that were used elsewhere in the world, but these items were holy because they were set apart for use in the service and worship of God.

God expected His people to recognise that some things were to be considered holy. He expected them to distinguish between what was holy and what was

¹ All biblical quotes are from the New King James Version Bible.

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otherwise. And when they failed to do that; when they failed to respect those things that God had set aside as holy, they were rebuked (**Ezekiel 22:26**).

b) God's people

God's people in the Old Testament were deemed to be a holy nation by God because He separated them from all the other nations around them.

When God brought the children of Israel out of Egypt, the people were still living on the earth just like everyone else. But God wanted them to be separate from the peoples around them – not just physically, but also religiously and morally. He described them in **Deuteronomy 7:6** as a “... *holy people to the Lord your God* ...”. This was not because they were somehow greater in numbers or morally superior to the other nations, for they were not – considers their sins throughout the wilderness wanderings (e.g. **Exodus 32:1-6**).

But God had set this nation apart to be His holy people because of His promise to their ancestors (**Deuteronomy 7:7-8**). And as such, while they were in the world, they were not to be “of the world” (to broadly quote from **John 17:15-16**). They were not to intermarry with the other nations, nor were they to follow their idolatrous practices (**Deuteronomy 7:3-5**). They were to serve and obey the Lord God and Him only (**Exodus 20:1-6; Deuteronomy 7:11**).

c) God Himself

God Himself is holy in the sense that He is separate from the world. As we saw in the first lesson, God is spirit (**John 4:24**). He existed in heaven long before this earth was formed. He still exists there, and will still be there long after this earth has been destroyed (**2 Peter 3:7, 10; John 14:2-3**).

God is far above all that we can see or imagine. He is all powerful (**Jeremiah 32:17; Matthew 19:26**); He is all knowing (**Psalms 147:5; Job 37:16b**); He is unchangeable (**Malachi 3:6a; James 1:17**), and He is always faithful (**2 Timothy 2:13; Hebrews 10:23**). It is God who “... *upholds all things by the word of His power* ...” (**Hebrews 1:3**).

But although God is separate from the world, biblical history shows that He has been actively involved in the history of His people on this planet (e.g. **2 Kings 17:7-18**), even to the extent of having His Son live here physically on earth for around 33 years (**John 3:16-17**).

In these ways, God is holy. He is separate from the heavens² and the earth, for He transcends them – He exists independently from and above them.

2) The term “holy” used in the sense of “moral purity”

The second use of the word “*holy*” in the scriptures is in the sense of being morally pure. In **1 John 1:5** we read;

“... *that God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all.*”

In the context, the word “*darkness*”, means sin, or evil. What the inspired apostle John is saying here is that there is absolutely no sin in God – not one little trace.

² That is, the physical heavens, such as the sky and the universe.

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He is 100% pure in morality. **Psalm 97:2** says that “*Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne*”. Moral purity is at the very core of His being.

We should also note that God’s holiness is not just another attribute that sits alongside His other qualities, such as love and mercy. His holiness sits above (or transcends) all these and permeates them. For example, His love is perfect (**1 John 4:7-10**). His mercy is good (**Psalm 86:5**). His word is pure (**Proverbs 30:5a**). His judgement is holy (**Isaiah 5:16**). In **Deuteronomy 32:4** we read;

*“He is the Rock, His work is perfect;
for all His ways are justice, a God of truth and without injustice;
Righteous and upright is He.”*

His holiness comes through in everything He thinks; everything He says; and everything He does.

And God alone is unique in His holiness. No-one is like Him. After the Hebrews had crossed the Red Sea, the children of Israel sang;

*“Who is like You among the gods?
Who is like You, glorious in holiness ...? (Exodus 15:11)*

And Hannah, after she had brought her son Samuel to Eli, prayed in **1 Samuel 2:2a**;

“No one is holy like the Lord, for there is none besides You ...”

Jesus Himself said; “.... *No one is good but One, that is, God.*” (**Mark 10:18**).

When we look at the moral purity of God, our sins become more obvious. The prophet Isaiah, when he saw in a vision the Lord sitting on His throne, said;

*“Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips;”
(Isaiah 6:5a)*

After seeing Jesus carry out one of His early miracles, the disciple Peter fell down on his knees before Jesus and confessed;

“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8)

God’s holiness is far above ours. We often give in to temptations and sin (**James 1:13-15; 1 John 1:8**). But not so God. He takes no pleasure in wickedness – no evil dwells with Him (**Psalm 5:4**).

Our God is holy in moral purity (**1 Peter 1:16**).

3) Because God is holy, so we are to be holy

Because God is holy, there is an obligation on His people to be holy as well;

“.... it is written, “Be holy, for I am holy”.” (1 Peter 1:16)

And this applies in both senses of the word, for both are linked.

We saw earlier in this lesson that His people in the Old Testament, the Jews, were not to be like the nations around them. They were to be separate both as a physical nation, and in their morality (**Deuteronomy 6:10-15; 7:1-6**).

The same principles apply to us today. Not in the sense that we should separate and isolate ourselves from everybody else³, but that we are to be separate from

³ If we cut ourselves off from the rest of the world, we will not be able to be lights to them (**Matthew 5:13-16**), nor be able to teach them the gospel (**Matthew 28:19; Acts 8:4**).

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the world in the sense that we think and act differently to the ways the world. We live in the world, but we are not to be of the world (**John 17:15-16**). Consider the following passages;

“...do not to 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”. (Romans 12:2)

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – is not of the Father but is of the world.” (1 John 2:15-16)

“Therefore, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” (2 Corinthians 7:1)

We read in the scriptures that we have been made holy through the blood of Jesus (**Colossians 1:21-22**). Through His sacrifice and God’s mercy, we have forgiveness – He no longer remembers our sins (**Hebrews 8:12**). But from passages such as **Colossians 1:23** and **1 John 1:7**, we see that those blessings are conditional on our walking faithfully with the Lord – *“perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord”*. And Peter shows us the process to living a holy life. We saw earlier **1 Peter 1:16** that we are commanded to be holy – *“Be holy, for I am holy”*. Now look at the preceding verses.

- a) Firstly, we see in verse **13** that our attitude needs to be right. *“Girding up the loins of our mind”* is to prepare your minds for the task ahead. The imagery is similar to us today saying *“let’s roll up our sleeves so that we can get stuck into the work”*.

We are to be sober, keeping our mind focussed on living righteously. The task ahead of us is a serious one, with eternal consequences. It won’t always be easy, and we shouldn’t approach it flippantly, for we are in a spiritual battle with the forces of darkness (**Ephesians 6:12**).

And underlying this attitude is the hope and confidence that we have in Jesus (**1 Timothy 1:1**). Our labours will not be in vain (**1 Corinthians 15:58**). When Jesus returns, those who have remained faithful will be raised to spend eternity with Him in heaven (**1 Thessalonians 4:13-17**).

- b) Secondly, in verse **14**, we are to be obedient to the Lord. This is a change in direction for our lives. It is a change from simply doing what we want to do, to doing what the Lord wants us to do (**Ephesians 5:8-10**).
- c) And thirdly, in verse **15**, it is putting that change into action – living the type of life that is pleasing to God (**Colossians 1:10**). Having the right doctrine is meaningless if we don’t apply it to our lives – our conduct needs to be holy. That is how we demonstrate our obedience. Notice what it says in **Matthew 7:23**;

*“Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord”, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who **does** the will of My Father in heaven.” (emphasis mine – SK)*

God is holy, and as His children, we are to be holy also.