



Pursuing Holiness: The Holiness of God

Fr. William Klock

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Last week I made reference to Leviticus 11:44, where God commands us, “be holy for I am holy.” We need to understand that that’s his commandment to *all* believers. I think people take a verse like that and think, “Well, I’m not a priest or a pastor, I’m not a missionary or a monk, so it must not apply to me. After all, those are the professional holy people.” It amazes sometimes me that all I have to do is put on a clerical collar and suddenly I become a “holy man” to most people – even to a lot of people in the church – when the fact is that apart from the righteousness of Christ, I’m no more holy than any other person on the planet. I put on my spiritual pants one leg at a time, just like everyone else. God’s point in Leviticus is to call *all* of us to holiness, regardless of our earthly vocation. Our divine vocation is holiness. All of us are “holy men.”

And notice the reason why God tells us to be holy: he says, “because I am holy.” That’s important, because it means he’s our standard. Our problem is that too often we’re satisfied with a sort of “cultural holiness.” We look to other Christians around us as our models and we conform ourselves to the standard of holiness that they set. The problem is that God didn’t call us to be holy as other Christians are holy. He called us to holy as *he is holy*. I don’t care whether you’re the Joe Pew-Sitter or Mother Theresa, as I said, we all put on spiritual pants on one leg at a time. None of us is perfect. None of us models the perfect holiness of God. True holiness is nothing less than conformity to the character of God.

When the Bible talks about holiness, it describes both the majesty of God *and* the purity of the moral perfection of his nature. We need to understand that holiness is one of God’s attributes. In fact, I’d say that it’s his most important. Holiness is an essential part of God’s nature. His holiness is as necessary as his existence. God would not be God if

holiness were not part of his character. Just like God’s wisdom and his being all-powerful are necessary to his existence, so is his holiness. Just as he cannot not *know* what is good and right, so he cannot but *do* what is good and right.

Our problem is that it’s not always possible for us as human beings to know what is right or what’s just or what’s fair. Because of our limitations we can sometimes get stuck – lost in a moral quandary trying to decide what’s right and what’s wrong. But God doesn’t have that problem. He’s perfect, and so there is never any question for him about right or wrong.

Sometimes we may know the right thing, but we hesitate to do it. We consider that doing the right thing might mean making a sacrifice or it might be a blow to our pride. God is the opposite. God never struggles to do the right thing. He does it and he does it without hesitation. It’s impossible in the very nature of God for him to do anything else.

You see, God’s holiness is perfect freedom from all evil. We talk about a piece of clothing being clean when it’s free from any spot, or gold being pure when all the dross and other trace elements and minerals have been refined out of it. You can think of God’s holiness in the same way – as being absolutely free from all and every form of evil. St. John wrote in his first epistle, “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). God is the essence of light – he’s the essence of moral purity.

And it’s not just God’s character that’s perfectly holy. He’s also perfect in his conformity to his own divine character. He never thinks or acts in a way that would be contrary to his holy character. Now contrast that with ourselves. At the moment of our justification Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us. We’re still unholy, but in a legal sense, the perfect righteousness of Christ is given to us – it’s Jesus that the Father sees when he judges us. But it doesn’t end there. Through the gracious work of God’s Spirit within us, that holiness gradually becomes more and more of a reality. As we mature and cooperate with the Spirit we develop a more and more Christ-like character. We grow in areas like truthfulness, purity, and humility. But even as we become more like Christ, our actions aren’t always consistent with our new character. We

still tell lies sometimes. We still allow ourselves to dwell on impure thoughts. And then we’re saddened when we consider that our actions aren’t consistent with our character. But that doesn’t happen to God. He always acts consistently with his holy character. And it’s his standard that he calls us to when he says, “Be holy, for I am holy.”

One of the ways we’re called to give God praise is by acknowledging his holiness. Think of St. John’s vision in Revelation 4, where the four living creatures around God’s throne never stop singing, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come” (Revelation 4:8). Or think of the seraphim in Isaiah’s vision of God’s glory, also singing that three-fold ascription of God’s holiness. When Moses was praising God for delivering the Israelites from the Egyptian army through the Red Sea, he sang of God’s holiness. That’s really interesting, because I’m not sure that would be what I’d be thinking of at that point in time, but Moses knew: God is holy. He sang:

Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders? (Exodus 15:11)

Through Scripture we see God described by names like the Holy One, or the Holy One of Israel. Stephen Charnock, one of the Puritans wrote a great book called *The Being and Attributes of God*, and in his book he notes that “holy” is used more often as a prefix to God’s name than anything else. Holiness is God’s crown.

Imagine God being infinite in power, having perfect and infinite knowledge, and being everywhere present, but without perfect holiness. Without holiness he would be something other than God. Holiness is the perfection of all his other attributes: his power is holy power, his mercy his holy mercy, his wisdom is holy wisdom. It’s his holiness more than anything else that makes God worthy of our praise.

So we need to acknowledge God’s holiness. But it doesn’t stop there. He tells us, “Be holy, for I am holy.” God rightfully demands holiness of all his moral creatures. It can’t be otherwise. God can’t possibly ignore or approve of or wink at any evil committed by anyone anywhere. He can’t relax his perfect standard or he would be something other

than he is. Instead he tells us, “So be holy in *all* you do.” Habbakkuk prayed saying, “You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong” (Habbakuk 1:13). Because he is holy, God can never excuse or overlook our sin, no matter how small it might seem to us.

And that’s just it. So often we sin, but we justify it; we say, “Well, but it just a little sin. We come up with all sorts of ways to justify our sin. But if we truly understand God’s holiness, both his holy character *and* what he demands of us, we’ll be able to see that we can *never* justify before him even the smallest deviation from his perfect will. God doesn’t accept the excuse, “Hey, that’s just the way I am,” or even, “Well, I’m still growing in that area of my life.”

God’s holiness doesn’t and can’t make any allowances for “minor” flaws and shortcomings in our character. It would be good for those of us justified solely through the righteousness of Christ, to meditate and think on the words of the writer to the Hebrews: “Make every effort...to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14 NIV).

Sometime we justify our sin by claiming that God tempted us. Maybe we don’t make that accusation blatantly, but we feel that God put us in a situation and gave us no choice. But St. James reminds us, “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone” (James 1:13).

King Saul felt that way in his first major campaign with the Philistines. Before going into battle, Saul was told to wait seven days. On the seventh day the priest Samuel was to come and make a sacrifice. Well, Saul waited seven days and when Samuel didn’t show up, he decided that he had no alternative but to make the burnt offering himself. He looked around him. After waiting for a week, the people were starting to become afraid and were scattering. The Philistines had had time to muster their army and were better prepared for a fight as each day went by. Samuel wasn’t there yet. Saul felt that he had to do something. It seemed to him like God had put him in a place where he had no choice but to disobey his explicit instructions.

But because Saul disobeyed God’s express will, he lost his kingdom. Now what about us? Do we sometimes feel the same way and do the same thing? Maybe we shade the truth a little bit or commit a “slightly” dishonest act? When we feel that way, we’re in effect saying that God is tempting us to sin, that he’s put us in a position in which we have no alternative.

One of the times we’re most vulnerable is when someone with authority turns up the pressure. When I worked as a computer tech I used to see our company do all sorts of dishonest things. We might have treated our customers well, but we weren’t above “sticking it” to our suppliers – after all they were just big faceless corporations that raked in millions in profits. What we stole from them was a drop in the bucket – and not to mention that because of their big bureaucracies they usually unfairly cost us a lot of money from time to time, so it was only payback – it all “came out in the wash.”

I saw it happening over my head all the time, but when it finally came down to my level and I was told that as part of my job I was to be dishonest and defraud our supplier I had to make a choice. I was pretty sure that if I stood up for what was right, they’d show me the door. I could have gone along with it, arguing that God put me in a situation where I had no choice, but I knew that God calls his children to model his own perfect holiness and I knew that God calls us to trust him – no matter what.

You see, because God is holy, he hates sin. That’s a strong word that we don’t like to use. It’s not P.C. these days. But when it comes to God’s attitude toward sin, we have to use the strongest word we have to convey just how much God hates it. God reproached Israel for her sins saying, “I *hate* all this” (Zechariah 8:17). Hatred is okay when it comes to sin, and in fact, the more we grow in holiness, the more we *will* hate sin. David said, “Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way” (Psalm 119:104). If that’s true for us, think about what it means for God. As we grow in holiness we grow in hatred of sin; and God, being infinitely holy, has an infinite hatred of sin.

How about this? How often do we say, “God hates the sin, but loves the sinner.” It’s true, but I think that a lot of the time we rush over the first half of that statement in order to get to the second. But we can’t escape the fact that God hates sin. We can trifle with our sins or excuse them, but God *hates* them.

And so every time we sin, we need to understand that we’re doing something that God hates. He hates our lustful thoughts. He hates our rationalisations that the end justifies the means. We need to be gripped by the fact that God hates all these things. Our problem is that we become so accustomed to our sins that we tend to lapse into peaceful coexistence with them. We may do that, but God continues to hate them.

We need to cultivate in our hearts the same hatred for sin that God has. Hatred of sin as sin, not just as something disquieting or defeating to ourselves, but as displeasing to God, lies at the root of all true holiness. We need to be like Joseph. When he was tempted he said, “How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?” (Genesis 39:9). Notice he wasn’t worried about personal defeat – he was worried about offending God!

God hates sin wherever he finds it. He hates sin in the saint just as much as he hates it in the sinner. He doesn’t hate it in one person and overlook it in another. St. Peter tells us that God judges each person impartially. In fact, if you look at the biblical record, God seems to judge the sins of his saints more severely than those of unbelievers. Take David. Scripture calls him a man after God’s own heart, yet after he murdered Uriah, Nathan prophesied saying “Now therefore, the sword will never depart from your house” (2 Samuel 12:10). Or think of Moses. For one act of unbelief, he was barred from crossing the Jordan and entering the promised land despite years of faithful service. Jonah, for his disobedience, was cast into a horrible prison in the stomach of a giant fish for three days and nights, so that he might learn not to run from God.

In the deceitfulness of our hearts, we sometimes play with temptation by entertaining the thought that we can always go to God *after* we’ve sinned to confess and ask for forgiveness. I remember doing that once when I was

about ten. My mom had explicitly pointed out some cookies in the pantry and told me not to eat them. Not long later I was left home alone and I made a beeline for the pantry. I stood looking at the cookies, thinking I could eat one and ask God to forgive me later. And that's exactly what I did. I ate one. And I asked forgiveness as I started happily munching on a second. I was anything but sorry for my sin. Playing with sin that way is dangerous. God's judgement is without partiality. He never overlooks our sin. He never decides not to bother or that it's not worth his time because the sin was small. No, God hates sin intensely whenever and wherever he finds it.

These are things we need to think about. We need to contemplate the holiness of God and his hatred of sin. Doing so is a strong deterrent against trifling with sin. St. Peter tells us that we should live our lives on earth as strangers in reverence and fear (1 Peter 1:17). The love of God to us through Jesus Christ really should be our biggest motivation to holiness, but a motivation prompted by God's hatred of sin and his judgement on it is really no less biblical.

So in the end we need to remember that God's holiness is an exceedingly high standard – a perfect standard. But its perfection doesn't exempt us from keeping it. Because of who he is God isn't capable of anything less. And while it's true that he accepts us based only on the merit of Jesus Christ, God's standard for our character, our attitudes, affections, and actions is always, "Be holy, for I am holy." If we are to grow in holiness, we have to take that command seriously.

Please pray with me: Holy Father, we ask you to keep your holiness always before our eyes. Remind us of the high standard to which we are called and remind us that without your grace, we can never achieve it. Remind us to rely on you and give us a passion to be holy as you are holy; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.