

GOD IS HOLY AND PERFECT**ISAIAH 6:1-4; REVELATION 4:1-8**

Do you remember the Wizard in the classic movie, “The Wizard of Oz”? Dorothy, the Cowardly Lion, the Scarecrow, and the Tin Man arrive at the legendary Emerald City to meet with the Wizard. He’s supposed to have the power to solve each of their problems. But to enter his presence, they must first make their way down this long, impressive hallway. Then, they’re greeted with an explosion and billows of green smoke. When it finally clears, this giant, menacing, bodiless head shouts, “I am Oz, the great and terrible! Who are you?” Dorothy attempts to respond, but the Wizard booms, “Silence! The great and terrible Oz knows why you are here. Step forward, Tin Man!” Each character is kind of humiliated, insulted, and made to feel small by the Wizard. The Cowardly Lion gets so overcome by fear that he faints. But then, as you might recall, Dorothy discovers the Wizard is just an old man pretending to be gruff and mean just to convince everyone he’s some great person. He just knows how to put on a good show in order to get people to be in awe of him. He’s actually a kind of bumbling, kindly old gentleman after all.

Many people think of God in much the same way as the Wizard comes off in that movie. Yes, to be sure, the Bible says He’s holy, awe-inspiring, and someone to fear. But that’s just kind of an act, isn’t it? God is really much more like a kindly old gentleman who exists to run the Universe, forgive people of their sins, and get Heaven ready for good people. Yes, He rants a lot in the Bible about hating sin, but in the end God is really just a big pussycat whose job is to overlook bad stuff – at least my bad stuff. He may have to end up judging really bad people or other people I don’t know or could care less about. But when it comes to me and the people I love, God is really like a big, indulgent, pot-bellied grandpa who just wants to help us all get along better.

Last week we began a new message series entitled “What’s Most Important About You? What You Think About God.” Everything about how you live your life today depends on how you answer – consciously or unconsciously - two questions. First, what is God really like? We’re looking at what the Bible says about God’s attributes. His attributes are simply what’s been revealed to us about God in His Word. Second, what difference do these attributes of God make in your life and mine? So, today, I want us to think about God’s holiness and perfection. And I also want us to think what difference God’s holiness and perfection make in your life and mine. So, let’s begin with this question.

WHAT DO GOD’S HOLINESS AND PERFECTION MEAN?

We’re going to consider several of God’s attributes in these messages. Which one do you think is most important? Last week we considered the truth God is eternal, in control or sovereign, as well as all powerful or omnipotent. In coming weeks we’ll reflect on the truth God is everywhere, knows everything, and is in everything. God is also merciful, gracious, faithful, and loving. Which one is most important? Holiness might well be God’s most important attribute according to the Bible. Here’s why. In two places in the Bible we’re taken into the very throne room of Heaven and allowed to experience something of what Heaven is like. The first one is when Isaiah, the Old

Testament prophet, saw the Lord. Let's read his story. In another passage, John, one of Jesus' disciples, saw the Lord. Let's read his story, too. What were the angels chanting as they surrounded God's throne in both passages? They could have shouted, "Eternal! Eternal! Eternal!" Or, they could have chanted, "All powerful! All powerful! All powerful!" They could have sung, "Loving! Loving! Loving!" But, no, what did they say? "Holy! Holy! Holy is the Lord God Almighty!"

God's holiness is proclaimed throughout the Bible. Here's Ex. 15:11 (NLT), "Who is like you among the gods, O LORD - glorious in holiness?" Pv. 9:10 (NLT) puts it this way, "Fear of the LORD is the foundation of wisdom. Knowledge of the Holy One results in good judgment." When we say God is holy, it means He's absolutely pure. He's morally perfect and excellent in every possible way. He's completely untouched by any kind of evil. Perhaps the color white offers an analogy. You know there are many different shades of white – everything from a very light gray, to cream, to off white, to the brightest white you could find at a paint store. Let's imagine God's holiness could be somehow reduced to a shade of white. The whitest white this world could ever produce would only be a dingy gray in comparison to the whiteness of God's purity. It would be such an intense, brilliant white it might burn out your eyeballs if you looked at it! The intensity of God's purity and holiness is beyond anything we can imagine.

But God's holiness goes beyond His absolute purity. The word "holy" points to the fact God is beyond human comprehension. Here are phrases from verses in Isaiah, 1 Samuel, and Hosea. "To whom will you compare me? Who is my equal?" asks the Holy One.... 'Who is able to stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God?'... 'I am God and not a mere mortal. I am the Holy One living among you.'" (Is. 40:25; 1 Sam. 6:20; Hos. 11:9 NLT) Holy is just the way God is. God hasn't conformed to any standard or template; He Himself is the standard and the template for everything else. God is absolutely unique and unlike everything else. While He's made Himself knowable; He can never be fully known or understood. He's unfathomable. So, "holy" means God defies description and can't be compared to anything or anyone else.

What do we mean when we say God is perfect? Completeness. The Bible pictures God as absolutely complete in every conceivable way. On the one hand, God lacks nothing. On the other hand, He possesses nothing He shouldn't have either. He Himself is the highest form of whatever is the very best in every possible dimension. There are degrees of excellence. A 10 year old boy can be an excellent basketball player. But LeBron James plays at another level of basketball excellence. There are no degrees of excellence in God. He's perfect in the fullest, most comprehensive way possible. We have many "full" words in English. We say something or someone is wonderful, graceful, beautiful, or merciful. God is the absolute fulfillment of those concepts. God alone is truly full of wonder, full of grace, full of beauty, and full of mercy. To say God is perfect also means every other attribute He possesses is perfect. God is perfect in His love, perfect in His grace, perfect in His justice, and perfect, yes, in His holiness.

Now, which one of God's attributes is the most misunderstood? It might well be the one which is the most important: holiness. In what way is God's holiness misunderstood?

Well, first of all, in our inappropriate response to God's holiness. Again, we have a tendency to approach God with a flippant, frivolous attitude. We prefer to think of Him as a kindly, lenient grandpa. But that's very different than how people in the Bible reacted when they experienced something of God's holiness. When Moses saw God, he hid his face in fear. Isaiah felt like he was going to drop dead right then and there. Many Bible characters just fell flat on their faces quaking in terror and dread when they were allowed access into God's presence: the prophets, Ezekiel and Daniel, as well as John, Jesus' disciple. Certainly, experiencing God can be comforting, peaceful, and joyful, but let's never forget experiencing God in all of His majesty and holiness can also be so overwhelming and terrifying that you're forever changed by the encounter.

I understand at the base of the pulpit in the Duke University chapel you can find an unusual symbol displayed. It's three triangles put together to symbolize the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Someone once asked, "Why's the symbol warning people of nuclear radiation etched into the pulpit?" Sure enough, the symbol in the pulpit does indeed look a great deal like the international warning symbol for nuclear radiation! But there it's intended to point to an absolutely holy God – a God who is fully capable of shaking the foundations of this world as well as your life and my life and, also, burning away all that's evil and wrong in the fire of His holy love. After all, the Bible does say it's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Here's at least one other way we can misunderstand God's holiness. We can refuse to apply God's holiness to our own lives. True, many of God's attributes can never be applied to us. Last week we reflected on the fact God is eternal, in control, sovereign, and all powerful or omnipotent. We can't be any of those. But God has other attributes He wants us to mirror or reflect as creatures made in His image. God is merciful, gracious, loving, and faithful, for example. We know God wants us to become merciful, gracious, loving, and faithful, too. What about being holy and perfect? Did you know God expects and wants you and me to be holy and perfect? That's hard to accept because we know ourselves only too well! We're very far from being either holy or perfect. And I wouldn't believe God wants me to be holy and perfect if God's Word didn't clearly state it. 1 Pt. 1:15-16 (NLT) says, "But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy. For the Scriptures say, 'You must be holy because I am holy.'" And Jesus Himself said in Mt. 5:48, "But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect." That's what the rest of today's message is about. Let's consider another question and its answer.

WHY DOES GOD WANT TO MAKE ME HOLY AND PERFECT?

Every occupant of Heaven is holy and perfect. That statement might come as a shock. We've heard all our lives that Heaven is for no good sinners who put their trust in Jesus. We've heard it's not our goodness or our feeble efforts to be holy that get us into Heaven. But listen to what the Bible says in Heb. 12:14 (NLT), "Work at living a holy life, for those who are not holy will not see the Lord." Here's a truth that should give each of us pause: a holy God will only allow holy beings into His eternal presence.

Holiness is the sign that you truly belong to God. One way we know kids belong to their parents is their resemblance to Mom or Dad. The way you can know if God is your spiritual Father is the fact you resemble Him more and more in your character, values, outlook, and treatment of others. I'm more than grateful God doesn't say in His Word, "Be holy as I am holy" or "Be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect." No, instead, it says, "Be holy, because I am holy" and "Be perfect, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect." What's the difference? We can never attain to the level of God's absolute, holiness or perfection, but God does bestow on us a degree of holiness. The angels in Heaven are holy, but not as holy as God. When we put our trust in Jesus and become His followers by faith, God bestows on us a degree of His awesome holiness as well.

That's why God wants to rid our lives of things like hate, gossip, bitterness, lust, pride, selfishness, greed – any attitude or action the Bible identifies as sin. None of that negative stuff can be found in God in even the smallest amounts. Instead, the Lord wants us to be filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control because all of those are found perfectly and fully in God. God is all those things to the nth degree. God wants you and me to look like we belong to His family. That's precisely what we find in a passage like Eph. 4:23-24 (NLT), "Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy." In other words, look like you belong!

Holiness is also a sign you've been set apart for God. In the Old Testament, certain people and objects were referred to as being holy. It meant both had been set apart for the exclusive use of God alone. God gave the people of Israel a pretty elaborate form of worship. Lots of stuff was utilized in the daily worship of God – altars, tables, bowls, forks, knives, candlesticks, cups, plates. All of these utensils were considered holy. That didn't mean these physical objects were morally upright! No, it meant they were set apart for the worship of God alone. You didn't eat your lunch on those tables or off those plates. You didn't cook a hamburger on those altars. You didn't wash your clothes in those bowls. They only had one purpose – to be used in the worship of God.

What was true of those objects is even more true of people who belong to God. If Jesus is your Lord and Savior, God owns you. Throughout the New Testament, we're called saints or, literally, "holy ones." You've been set apart for Him to be with Him, to become like Him, and to serve Him. Jesus is now the Master or Boss of every area of your life – every thought, every attitude, every action, every relationship, every decision, and every dollar. Now, there's often a sizeable gap between the goal and the reality. God is in the process of making you and me holy. It doesn't happen all at once. Today, God might say to you, "It's time to surrender your temper to Me." Next year, God might say to you, "It's time to surrender your money and possessions to Me." Five years from now, God might say to you, "It's time to surrender your anxiety and fear to Me." You and I are the Holy Spirit's lifelong project. He's making us holy. It's absolutely essential work because holiness means we belong to the Lord and we've been set apart for Him.

Guston Borglum was the sculptor who carved the massive figures of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt on Mt. Rushmore in South Dakota. I saw

that monument for myself years ago. Impressive, indeed. When he was asked how he could produce such an amazing piece of art, Borglum said, “Those figures were there for 40 million years. All I had to do was dynamite 400,000 tons of granite to bring them into view.” God is doing the same thing in your life and mine. He chips here and chisels there. Yes, He might even have to dynamite a few spots. All the while, He’s shaping and sculpting you and me into a Jesus-like character.

Perhaps right now you’re thinking, “Who are you kidding, Rick? This is impossible! I’m never going to be holy. I don’t resemble God’s character very much at all. There’s just so much more work to be done.” Well, that points us to a final question and its answer.

HOW DOES GOD MAKE ME HOLY AND PERFECT?

First, God imputes His holiness into you and me. You could say He just puts holiness right into you! At the moment you surrender your life to Jesus as your Lord and Savior, God declares you to be holy. All your sins and their guilt are transferred or put into Jesus. That’s what happened at the cross and it’s part of what we remember and celebrate every time we partake of Communion as we will today. At the same time, God takes the perfect holiness of Jesus and puts it into you and me. He transfers or imputes it into us. Heb. 10:10 (NLT) says, “For God’s will was for us to be made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all time.”

Because God is absolutely holy, He can never just overlook evil, injustice, sin, or wrong and leave it unpunished. So, God sent Himself in the person of Jesus to be punished in our place. The cross demonstrated God’s awesome and absolute holiness better than anything else. This is wonderful news for us – this transference - because we could certainly never do it for ourselves. But how does God pull this off? A humble example. You’ve heard of rose-tinted glasses, right? You look through them and everything has a reddish color to it. Well, when God looks at you and me now, He looks at us through Jesus-tinted glasses, so to speak. He sees you and me in or through Jesus. Jesus’ perfect holiness covers us – our sins, our past, our failures - completely and forever.

But, secondly, God also imparts His holiness into you and me gradually. God isn’t content to look at us through Jesus-tinted glasses and just leave it there. He knows the difference between holiness that’s been imputed and imparted. That’s why we find in the Bible promises like Heb. 10:14 (NLT), “For by that one offering (Jesus’ death on the cross) he forever made perfect those who are being made holy.” Or consider Eph. 1:4 (NLT) “Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes.” In both verses, holiness is described as something gradual – it happens as a process. Holiness is both an event and a process. And it happens both instantly and gradually. The instant event is imputation. God declares you and me to be holy when we put our trust in who Jesus is and what He did for us at the cross. But there’s also a gradual process after the instant event. That’s impartation. And in both cases, God is there making it all happen. It would be impossible without Him. That’s why God Himself says in Lev. 20:8, “I am the LORD who makes you holy.”

Let me close with three brief observations. First, there's no place of exceptions. God is relentless. When God took it upon Himself to impart holiness into you and me, He will leave no place in us untouched. He's completely capable of using anything and everything – Scripture, prayer, the church, other followers of Jesus, non-believers, our sins and failures, our disappointments and defeats in life, as well as all the blessings and good things – to work holiness into your life and mine gradually. He will go after every secret sin, every proud thought, and every un-surrendered part of our lives.

Second, there's no place for laziness. The Holy Spirit will be faithful to speak into your life and say something like, "This is an attitude or a behavior that has to go" or "You need to add this to your life." I guarantee you'll want to procrastinate and say, "Maybe later." You'll want to negotiate. Here's an old tongue-in-cheek observation I like very much, "I'm perfectly willing to compromise, but God wants it His own way." If we get lazy in this whole process of becoming holy, God has ways to get our attention. He can use setbacks, disappointments, failures, whatever. You might object, "But, Rick, I just don't think a loving God would ever do that." On the contrary. Could a truly loving, holy God act any differently? God will do everything He needs to do to save us from sin, from the devil's influence, and from our own broken selves so that He can present us holy before Himself for all eternity. Don't be lazy. Cooperate with the Holy Spirit.

Third, there's no place for discouragement. Yes, the Holy Spirit will be working on you for the rest of your life on Earth. Correcting. Shaping. Molding. But the what and the when is up to God. Because He's an infinitely loving God, He will do His work in our lives at a rate that's perfectly suited for us. What God has started, God will finish. One day, God will fulfill His plan in you and me perfectly and completely. Ph. 1:6 gives us that promise, "And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns."

A little girl was visiting a famous and beautiful cathedral with her aunt. It was late afternoon and the sun's rays were streaming through a stained glass window that depicted several great people of God in the Bible. The little girl pointed at one standing out prominently in the strong light and asked her aunt, "Who's that?" Her aunt said, "That's St. Peter." Her niece pointed to another, "Who's that?" "That's St. John." Once more, she pointed to another figure in the window and asked, "And who is that?" Her aunt replied, "That's St. James." The little girl let out a sigh and said, "Well, now I know what a saint is. A saint is somebody the light shines through." Quite true.

God is holy and perfect. And for thousands of years, He's been gathering a family of people who shine with the light of His holiness into a world that's dark, evil, and anything but holy. Remember, every follower of Jesus is called a saint in the Bible – literally, a "holy one." And as that little girl in the cathedral truly observed, a saint is somebody the light shines through. May the light of God's holiness shine through you and me today, tomorrow, and forever!