

# FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

## THEOLOGY PROPER

The Doctrine of God

### UNIT 5: THE COMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

#### Lesson 14

### The Holiness of God

The Attribute That Crowns All Others

**Key Texts: Isaiah 6:1–8; 1 Peter 1:15–16; Revelation 4:8; Habakkuk 1:13**

Holy, Holy, Holy — The Attribute That Qualifies All Others

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#### Series Verse

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”

**Romans 11:33–36, NASB 1995**

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## Introduction

With Lesson 14 we cross the great divide at the center of Unit 4 and Unit 5, the threshold between the incommunicable attributes of God, those perfections that belong to God alone and cannot in any form be shared with creatures, and the communicable attributes, those perfections that God, in His gracious design, has chosen to reflect in varying and derivative degrees in the creatures He has made in His image. We have studied aseity, immutability, eternity, infinity, omnipresence, omniscience, and wisdom, attributes that describe what it means to be God as opposed to being a creature. Now, in Unit 5, we press into the attributes that constitute what God is in His moral character: holiness, righteousness, goodness, love, grace, mercy, and wrath.

We begin with the attribute that stands at the apex of them all, the attribute that is, in a profound sense, not merely one communicable attribute among others but the crown and the qualifier of all the others: the holiness of God. The great Reformed theologian and apologist R. C. Sproul, whose work *The Holiness of God* stands as perhaps the most influential modern treatment of this subject, expressed the singular significance of divine holiness with characteristic precision: holiness is not one attribute among many; it is the attribute that qualifies all others. God's love is holy love. His justice is holy justice. His wrath is holy wrath. His mercy is holy mercy. His wisdom is holy wisdom. Every other attribute of God is shaped, qualified, and governed by His holiness, which means that to misunderstand the holiness of God is, eventually, to misunderstand everything else about Him.

In this lesson we will define divine holiness in its twofold sense, ontological otherness and ethical purity, and then press into the most magnificent and most searching biblical encounter with divine holiness in all of Scripture: the throne-room vision of Isaiah 6. We will hear the seraphic anthem that has echoed through the worship of the church for three millennia, witness the prophet's undoing at the vision of the holy God, receive the coal of cleansing that foreshadows the atoning work of Christ, and draw out the implications of divine holiness for the gospel, for the call to personal holiness, and for the entirety of the Christian life.

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## I. Defining Holiness: Ontological Otherness and Ethical Purity

The word "holy", Hebrew *qadōsh* (קדוש), Greek *hagios*, carries a primary and irreducible core meaning: separation, distinctness, being set apart from the common and ordinary. In the Old Testament cultic vocabulary, holiness is the quality that belongs to persons, places, times, and objects that have been set apart from common use and consecrated to the service and presence of God. The Sabbath is holy because it has been set apart from the ordinary days. The Temple is holy because it has been set apart from ordinary buildings. The priests are holy because they have been set apart from ordinary Israelites for the service of God.

When holiness is attributed to God Himself, when we declare that God is holy, the primary meaning of separation is not diminished but infinitely elevated. God is not holy in the sense that He has been set apart by some higher authority; He is holy in the

sense that He is the original, the archetype, the very source and definition of holiness. Every creaturely holiness is derived from His; every other holy thing is holy only by virtue of its relationship to Him. And His holiness is the absolute, infinite, unconditioned separation of the divine being from everything that is not God, the infinite qualitative distinction between the Creator and the creature, between the pure and the defiled, between the self-existent and the derived.

The theological tradition has carefully distinguished two dimensions of divine holiness that are inseparable in the divine being but analytically distinct for the purposes of theological understanding.

### **A. Ontological Holiness: God Is Wholly Other**

The ontological dimension of divine holiness is the holiness of God's being as such, His absolute, infinite, irreducible distinctness from everything He has made. This is sometimes called the "majesty holiness" or the "transcendence holiness" of God: the holiness that belongs to Him in virtue of what He is, prior to any moral consideration, simply because He is the uncreated Creator and everything else is created. Rudolf Otto, the German phenomenologist of religion, called this dimension of divine holiness the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the mysterious, trembling-inducing, and fascinating otherness of the holy. It is what makes the encounter with the divine categorically different from any other encounter, what makes the ground of the burning bush genuinely "holy ground" not because of any moral property of the soil but because of the proximity of the One who is categorically, ontologically, irreducibly other.

This ontological holiness is what stands behind the characteristic biblical response to divine encounter: not mere reverence or respectful admiration, but prostration, terror, the cry of unworthiness, the recognition of a gulf between the creature and the Creator that no creaturely resource can bridge. When Isaiah sees the LORD in His glory in Isaiah 6, the response is not "I see a Being who is very impressive"; it is "Woe is me, for I am ruined!" (Isaiah 6:5, NASB 1995). When Peter witnesses the miraculous catch of fish and recognizes the presence of the Lord Jesus, the response is not admiration but prostration: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" (Luke 5:8, NASB 1995). The encounter with the holy God does not produce in the creature a comfortable awareness of divine superiority; it produces the anguished recognition of the infinite qualitative difference between the holy and the unholy, the clean and the defiled, the Maker and the made.

### **B. Ethical Holiness: God Is Wholly Pure**

The ethical dimension of divine holiness is the holiness of God's moral character, His absolute, infinite, unwavering conformity to the highest possible moral standard, which is identical with His own nature. God does not merely meet an external moral standard; He is the standard. His character is not evaluated against some prior moral law; His character is the source and ground of all moral law. He is incapable of sin, not in the sense that some external constraint prevents Him from sinning, but in the sense that sinning would require a contradiction of His own nature, which is impossible. He is, in every thought, every intention, every decision, and every act, perfectly, infinitely, and irreversibly pure.

Habakkuk 1:13 declares the ethical dimension of divine holiness with unmistakable directness: “Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You cannot look on wickedness with favor” (NASB 1995). The holiness of God is not a preference for the morally better option among available alternatives; it is a nature so pure that evil is not merely unattractive to Him but constitutionally incompatible with His being. He cannot look on wickedness with approval, not because He restrains Himself, but because the character of His holiness makes such a thing impossible. This ethical holiness is what makes God’s moral commands not arbitrary decrees but reflections of His own character, and what makes His judgment of sin not capricious wrath but the necessary expression of the absolutely pure nature that cannot coexist with moral evil.

## II. The Seraphic Anthem: Holy, Holy, Holy Is the LORD of Hosts

The most magnificent declaration of divine holiness in all of Scripture, and, by the testimony of the entire Christian tradition, one of the most theologically significant verses in the whole canon, is Isaiah 6:3, the antiphonal cry of the seraphim in the throne-room vision of the prophet:

“Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.”, Isaiah 6:3, NASB 1995

The threefold repetition of “Holy” is, in the Hebrew literary tradition, the superlative of superlatives. Hebrew does not express the superlative degree through a grammatical suffix (as English does with “-est”); it expresses intensification through repetition. To say something twice is to say it emphatically; to say it three times is to declare it absolutely, utterly, and without qualification. There is no other attribute of God in all of Scripture that is given this triple repetition. God’s love is celebrated at great length; His power is declared in magnificent terms; His wisdom is praised with the exuberance of Proverbs 8; but no other divine attribute receives the tripling that holiness receives in Isaiah 6:3.

The Revelation of John echoes this anthem in the heavenly throne room of Revelation 4:8, where the four living creatures “do not cease to say day and night, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come”” (NASB 1995). The Revelation passage adds the temporal dimensions, “who was and who is and who is to come”, connecting the divine holiness of Isaiah’s vision to the eternal, immutable character of the triune God who is the same throughout all of time and eternity. The seraphic anthem has not ceased; it has been taken up by the redeemed in the consummation of all things, and it will be the anthem of eternity.

R. C. Sproul’s observation is worth pressing deeply: holiness is the only attribute of God that receives this three-fold repetition in the Scripture. No text says “Love, love, love is the LORD.” No text says “Wise, wise, wise is God.” No text says “Just, just, just is the LORD of hosts.” But this text, and its echo in Revelation 4:8, declares Holy, Holy, Holy. The superlative repetition signals something of supreme importance: that whatever else may be said about God, whatever other attributes and perfections He possesses in infinite measure, His holiness stands at the crown of them all, the one attribute that the living creatures and the seraphim, the beings who dwell closest to the divine presence, declare without ceasing, day and night, as the supreme summation of who He is.

The second half of the seraphic anthem deserves attention as well: “the whole earth is full of His glory.” The Hebrew *kəbôd* (glory), from a root meaning weight, heaviness, substance, is the visible, perceptible expression of God’s essential being, the outward manifestation of the inner reality of His holiness. The seraphim declare not only that the LORD is holy, but that the holiness of the LORD fills the whole earth with its expression. Creation is not a neutral stage on which God’s drama unfolds; it is saturated with the glory of the holy God, filled to its capacity with the expression of the One who made it. Every mountain, every valley, every ocean, every starfield, all of it declares the glory of the One whose holiness fills the throne room of heaven and overflows into the whole of the created order.

### III. Isaiah’s Response: Woe Is Me, for I Am Ruined

Having declared the content of the vision, the LORD high and lifted up, the seraphim, the anthem of holiness, Isaiah records his own response, and it is one of the most theologically instructive passages in the entire Old Testament:

“Then I said, ‘Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.’”, Isaiah 6:5, NASB 1995

The response is not admiration. It is not reverence. It is not even the ordinary religious feeling of awe before a great and powerful being. It is the cry of annihilation, the recognition that the self which has encountered the holy God is, by that very encounter, exposed as radically, fundamentally, and irreparably defiled. The Hebrew word translated “ruined” is *nidmêṭî*, from a root meaning to be undone, to be silenced, to cease to be. Isaiah does not feel that he needs improvement; he feels that he needs to cease to exist, because the holiness he has just encountered has made his existence, as it is, in its natural, unclean, sin-stained condition, constitutively incompatible with the One before whom he stands.

The specific form of his uncleanness is significant: “I am a man of unclean lips.” Isaiah was, by the testimony of the Old Testament, the greatest of the writing prophets, the man whose ministry of declaration was the most expansive, the most eloquent, and the most theologically rich of any Old Testament figure. If anyone had grounds for confidence in the purity of his speech before God, it was the prophet whose very vocation was the declaration of the divine word. And yet it is precisely the lips, the instrument of his prophetic calling, the most carefully exercised of all his faculties in the service of God, that he identifies as the point of his defilement. The holiness of God exposes the defilement of even the best and most consecrated human effort. If Isaiah’s lips are unclean, no human lips are clean.

This is the universal implication of divine holiness for every human being who encounters it honestly: not gradual improvement, but radical ruin. Not the need for a little more piety, a little more spiritual discipline, a little more moral effort, but the collapse of every creaturely pretension to standing before the holy God on the basis of one’s own merit or effort. The encounter with the holiness of God is the most effective cure for religious self-satisfaction that exists, because it reveals not merely that we have room for improvement but that we are, in our natural condition, constitutively

incompatible with the God we face. This is the diagnosis that the gospel is designed to address.

But Isaiah's vision does not end with the declaration of ruin. It moves immediately and graciously to the provision of cleansing:

"Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said, 'Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.'",  
Isaiah 6:6–7, NASB 1995

The coal from the altar, the altar of sacrifice, the place where the blood of atonement was offered for the sins of the people, is the instrument of cleansing. It is not a gentle reassurance; it is a burning, purging, consuming application of sacrificial fire. The holiness that declares the sinner ruined is also the holiness that provides the means of cleansing, but the cleansing costs everything. It is not a cosmetic touch-up but a radical purification, accomplished not by the sinner's effort but by the gracious provision of the holy God Himself. In this respect, Isaiah 6 is one of the most compact and most complete anticipations of the gospel in the entire Old Testament.

## **IV. Holiness as the Crown of All Attributes: R. C. Sproul's Decisive Observation**

We have already introduced R. C. Sproul's foundational observation in the introduction to this lesson, but it deserves a full section of exposition and application because of its importance not merely for the doctrine of holiness but for the entire doctrine of God. Sproul's claim is this: holiness is not one attribute among others in the divine being; it is the attribute that qualifies, shapes, and governs all the others. Every divine attribute is expressed in a manner consistent with, and shaped by, the divine holiness.

Consider what this means for each of the attributes we have already studied and will study in the lessons that follow.

### **A. God's Love Is Holy Love**

The love of God, which we will explore in detail in Lesson 16, is not the sentimental, morally indifferent affection that popular religion has often imagined. It is not a love that overlooks sin, ignores moral reality, or offers acceptance without transformation. It is holy love: a love that takes the moral condition of its object with absolute seriousness, that grieves over the defilement of the beloved, that refuses to leave the beloved in the condition of uncleanness that love has found, and that provides, at infinite cost to itself, the means of cleansing that holiness requires. The love of God is not less than its popular understanding suggests; it is infinitely more demanding, more costly, and more transformative. It is the love of the holy God, a love that cannot be satisfied until the beloved is as holy as the God who loves.

### **B. God's Justice Is Holy Justice**

The justice of God, which we will explore in Lesson 15, is not the impersonal operation of a cosmic legal mechanism. It is holy justice: the expression of the absolutely pure

moral character of God in His governance of the universe. When God judges sin, He does not do so as a reluctant enforcer of external rules; He does so as the expression of a nature that is constitutionally incapable of treating sin as though it were not sin. The justice of the holy God is the inevitable response of infinite moral purity to moral evil, not wrath as emotionally volatile outburst, but wrath as the settled, righteous, holy opposition of the pure God to everything that defiles His creation and degrades His image-bearers.

### **C. God's Wrath Is Holy Wrath**

Perhaps nowhere is Sproul's observation more practically important than in the doctrine of divine wrath, which we will examine in Lesson 18. The wrath of God is not a defect in the divine character, not a lapse from the ideal of pure love, not an embarrassment to be explained away or softened into irrelevance. It is holy wrath: the perfectly pure, morally serious, absolutely righteous response of the infinite holiness of God to sin. A God who had no wrath against sin, who was indifferent to moral evil, who witnessed the destruction of His image-bearers and the defilement of His creation with equanimity, would not be a more loving God; He would be a morally deficient God, a God without genuine holiness. The wrath of God is the expression of His love for holiness and His love for His creatures, and these are not separable.

### **D. God's Grace Is Holy Grace**

The grace of God, His unmerited favor toward those who deserve only judgment, is possible precisely because the holiness of God has been fully satisfied in the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Grace is not cheap; it is not the divine decision to overlook sin without addressing it. It is holy grace: the provision of the holy God for the cleansing that His holiness demands, accomplished in a way that does not compromise His justice, does not minimize the seriousness of sin, and does not leave the sinner in the condition of defilement that grace has found. The grace of the holy God produces holiness in those who receive it, not as a condition of its being given, but as the inevitable and transformative fruit of genuine encounter with the God who is Holy, Holy, Holy.

## **V. The Implications for the Gospel: Only a Holy God Requires a Perfect Sacrifice**

The holiness of God is not only the ground of human conviction and ruin, the truth that exposes every human pretension to standing before God on the basis of one's own merit. It is also the ground of the gospel itself, the truth that makes the good news not merely welcome but necessary. For the gospel is the announcement that the holy God, who cannot overlook sin without compromising His holiness, has Himself provided the means of atonement that His holiness requires.

The logic of the gospel is inseparable from the logic of divine holiness. Because God is infinitely holy, sin against Him is infinitely serious, not merely a social failing, not merely a psychological problem, not merely a developmental obstacle to be overcome, but a genuine moral offense against the absolutely pure character of the infinite God. Because the offense is infinite in its moral weight, only an infinite satisfaction can

address it. Because the human sinner cannot provide an infinite satisfaction from the resources of his own finite, sinful being, only a substitute who is both fully human (and therefore able to represent humanity) and fully divine (and therefore able to bear an infinite weight of judgment) can provide what the holiness of God requires. This is why the incarnation is not a gracious option among alternatives; it is the necessary provision of the holy God for the atonement that His holiness demands.

The coal from the altar in Isaiah 6:6–7, the burning instrument of atonement applied to the unclean lips of the prophet, is the Old Testament symbol of what the New Testament announces as accomplished fact: that the fire of divine holiness, instead of consuming the sinner who deserves to be consumed, has been applied to the Holy One who volunteered to stand in the sinner's place. "He 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, NASB 1995). The One who knew no sin, the perfectly, infinitely holy Son of God, became sin, bore the full weight of God's holy wrath against sin, and was consumed by the fire of divine judgment that the sinner deserved. And in His resurrection, the coal of holy fire, having accomplished its purifying work, gives way to the life that cannot be held by death, the life of the holy God who has triumphed over every defilement and every consequence of sin.

This is why the holiness of God is, as Sproul insisted, the most important doctrine in all of Theology Proper. Without it, the gospel makes no sense. Without the infinite holiness of God, the seriousness of sin is merely relative, a matter of social convention or psychological consequence, not of cosmic moral weight. Without the infinite holiness of God, the necessity of atonement is unclear, why should the death of the Son of God be required for the forgiveness of sins, if sin is not infinitely serious? Without the infinite holiness of God, the grace of the gospel is cheap, not the provision of infinite love for the satisfaction of infinite holiness, but a casual divine willingness to overlook offense. It is precisely because God is Holy, Holy, Holy that the Son became flesh, died, and rose, and it is precisely this gospel that is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes.

## VI. The Call to Holiness: Be Holy, for I Am Holy

The holiness of God does not remain at a safe theological distance; it enters the practical life of God's people as a direct and commanding imperative. Peter, quoting Leviticus 11:44–45 and 19:2, addresses the new covenant people with the same imperative that the holy God addressed to Israel at Sinai:

"but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'", 1 Peter 1:15–16, NASB 1995

The logic of the imperative is grounded in the nature of the relationship between God and His people. The holy God has called His people into a covenant relationship with Himself, a relationship that is defined by His character and that therefore demands of those who enter it a conformity to that character. This is not holiness as a condition for acceptance; it is holiness as the inevitable implication and the expected fruit of being accepted. We are called to be holy because we are in relationship with the Holy One, because the character of the One with whom we live and walk and fellowship is the

standard by which the character of those who live and walk and fellowship with Him is to be shaped.

The phrase “in all your behavior” is crucial. This is not a holiness that is confined to the religious dimensions of life, to the sanctuary, the prayer closet, the theological study. It is a holiness that pervades and shapes every dimension of the believer’s life: work and leisure, speech and silence, public and private, relationship and solitude. The holy God does not compartmentalize; He is holy in everything He is and does, and the people who bear His image and bear His name are called to reflect that comprehensive holiness in the whole of their lives.

The New Testament understanding of the call to holiness is grounded in the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, who is given to every believer precisely as the Agent of this conformity to the divine character. The Spirit who indwells the believer is the Spirit of holiness (Romans 1:4; Ephesians 4:30), and His presence is the guarantee that the imperative “Be holy” is not merely an impossible demand but a transforming promise, the promise that the holy God who calls His people to holiness is also the holy God who, by His Spirit, is at work within them to produce the very holiness He requires. “For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13, NASB 1995).

## **VII. The Doxological Response: Learning to Worship the Holy God**

The holiness of God is not, in the end, primarily a doctrine to be analyzed or even a standard to be pursued; it is a reality to be encountered and a Person to be worshipped. The seraphim of Isaiah 6 do not study holiness and arrive at a doctrine; they behold holiness and cannot restrain themselves from crying out. The four living creatures of Revelation 4 do not contemplate holiness as a theological proposition; they are arrested by it without ceasing, day and night, in the inexhaustible anthem of the heavenly court. The worship that divine holiness calls forth is not a duty performed from a safe distance; it is the irresistible response of creatures who have been exposed to a glory and a purity that they can neither produce, nor approach, nor fully bear, and yet cannot look away from.

The history of Christian worship has always, at its healthiest, been shaped by the awareness of divine holiness. The ancient liturgies of the church placed the trisagion, “Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One”, at the very center of corporate worship, as the church’s echo of the seraphic anthem. The great hymnody of the church has returned again and again to the holiness of God as the ground of its most exalted praise: “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty! Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee; Holy, Holy, Holy! Merciful and Mighty! God in Three Persons, blessed Trinity!” (Reginald Heber, 1826). The connection is not accidental: genuine worship is always shaped by genuine holiness, and genuine holiness always issues in genuine worship.

But the worship of the holy God is not only the high, formal worship of the liturgical tradition; it is the daily, moment-by-moment orientation of the life that has been broken by the holiness of God and cleansed by the blood of His Son. The believer who has truly encountered the holiness of God, who has stood, even for a moment, in the place where Isaiah stood, and heard even a faint echo of the seraphic anthem, and felt even a

shadow of the holy weight that pressed the prophet to the ground, is a believer whose life is permanently reordered by that encounter. The priorities shift. The values are recalibrated. The things that once seemed of supreme importance, comfort, reputation, pleasure, security, are seen in the light of the holiness of God for what they are: creaturely trivialities. And the things that truly matter, the knowledge of the Holy One, the conformity to His character, the declaration of His glory to the ends of the earth, take their proper place at the center of a life that has been undone and remade by the encounter with the living God.

Isaiah's call comes after the cleansing, not before it: "Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?' Then I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'" (Isaiah 6:8, NASB 1995). The encounter with holiness produces ruin; the provision of cleansing restores; the restoration makes possible the commissioning. This is the pattern of the Christian life in miniature: the holy God undoes us, then remakes us, then sends us. The holiness that devastates is also the holiness that transforms; and the holiness that transforms is also the holiness that commissions. Here am I, Lord. Send me.

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## Key Texts (NASB 1995)

### Isaiah 6:1–8

"In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, 'Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory.' And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. Then I said, 'Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.' Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said, 'Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.' Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?' Then I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'"

### 1 Peter 1:15–16

"but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'"

### Revelation 4:8

"And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come.'"

**Habakkuk 1:13**

“Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You cannot look on wickedness with favor.”

**Theological Terms and Definitions**

| Term                        | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Holiness</b>             | From Hebrew <i>qadōsh</i> and Greek <i>hagios</i> , meaning set apart, separate, consecrated. Applied to God, holiness encompasses both His ontological otherness (His infinite qualitative distinctness from all creaturely being) and His ethical purity (His absolute moral perfection and total separation from sin). The supreme divine attribute, the only one repeated three times in Scripture (Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8), which qualifies and shapes every other divine perfection. |
| <b>Ontological Holiness</b> | The dimension of divine holiness that concerns God’s being as such: His absolute, infinite, irreducible distinctness from everything He has made. Also called “majesty holiness” or “transcendence holiness.” This is the holiness that produces in the creature not mere reverence but the anguished recognition of the infinite qualitative difference between the holy Creator and the unholy creature (Isaiah 6:5; Luke 5:8).                                                              |
| <b>Ethical Holiness</b>     | The dimension of divine holiness that concerns God’s moral character: His absolute, unwavering conformity to the highest possible moral standard, which is identical with His own nature. God cannot sin, not because an external constraint prevents Him, but because sin would require a contradiction of His nature. Declared in Habakkuk 1:13: “Your eyes are too pure to approve evil.”                                                                                                   |
| <b>Qadōsh (קדוש)</b>        | Hebrew adjective meaning holy, set apart, consecrated. The root (q-d-sh) carries the fundamental idea of separation from the common and ordinary. Applied to God, it describes the infinite qualitative distinctness of His being from all created being. Used in the seraphic anthem of Isaiah 6:3 in its superlative triple form: Qadōsh, Qadōsh, Qadōsh.                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Seraphim (שרפים)</b>     | Hebrew plural from saraph (“to burn”). The fiery angelic beings of Isaiah 6:2–6, the only biblical occurrence of the term. They stand above the divine throne with six wings each, covering their faces and feet in reverence and using the remaining two for flight. Their perpetual ministry is the declaration of the divine holiness (“Holy, Holy, Holy”), making them the supreme angelic witnesses to the holiness of God.                                                               |

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|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Trisagion</b>                        | From the Greek tris (“three times”) and hagios (“holy”). The threefold cry of holiness from Isaiah 6:3, taken up in Revelation 4:8 and used throughout the worship of the church from the earliest centuries. Appears in ancient liturgies as “Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One.” The triple repetition is the Hebrew superlative of superlatives, signaling that holiness is the supreme, absolute, unqualified attribute of God.                                  |
| <b>Kəbôd (כְּבוֹד)</b>                  | Hebrew noun meaning glory, weight, heaviness, substance. From a root denoting that which has weight and substance. The divine glory is the visible, perceptible expression of God’s essential being, the outward manifestation of the inner reality of His holiness. The seraphim declare that the whole earth is full of God’s glory (Isaiah 6:3), linking holiness with its manifestation in the created order.                                                               |
| <b>Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans</b> | Latin phrase coined by Rudolf Otto (The Idea of the Holy, 1917) to describe the character of the encounter with the holy: a mystery that is simultaneously trembling-inducing (tremendum) and fascinating or attractive (fascinans). The holy God produces in the creature both the terror of absolute otherness and the irresistible attraction of infinite beauty, corresponding to the twofold response of Isaiah 6: “Woe is me, for I am ruined!” and “Here am I. Send me!” |
| <b>Nidmêti (נִדְמֵיתִי)</b>             | Hebrew verb form in Isaiah 6:5, translated “I am ruined” (NASB) or “I am undone” (KJV). From a root meaning to be silenced, to cease, to be destroyed. Isaiah’s cry is not merely that he feels unworthy but that the encounter with the holy God has exposed him as constitutively incompatible with the divine presence in his natural, unclean state. The most radical form of creaturely self-assessment in the face of divine holiness.                                    |
| <b>Communicable Attributes</b>          | Those divine perfections that God, in His gracious design, reflects in varying and derivative degrees in the creatures He has made in His image. Includes holiness, righteousness, love, goodness, mercy, grace, and wrath. Distinguished from the incommunicable attributes (aseity, immutability, eternity, infinity, omnipresence, omniscience), which belong to God alone. The communicable attributes form the subject of Unit 5 (Lessons 14–18).                          |

## Practical Application

### A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the holiness of God is not merely one attribute among others in a catalogue of divine perfections, but the crown and qualifier of all of them, the attribute that shapes, governs, and gives proper character to every other divine perfection. We must believe both dimensions of holiness: the ontological (God is infinitely, categorically other than all created being) and the ethical (God is infinitely, absolutely, perfectly pure in His moral character). We must believe that Habakkuk 1:13 is literally and absolutely

true: God's eyes are too pure to approve evil; He cannot look on wickedness with favor. And we must believe that this truth, far from being an obstacle to the gospel, is its very foundation, for it is precisely the infinite holiness of God that makes the cross of Jesus Christ not a tragic accident but the most necessary and most magnificent event in the history of the universe.

## B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

The holiness of God should produce in us an Isaiah response: the collapse of every pretension to self-sufficiency before God, the honest acknowledgment that we are unclean, that our lips are defiled, that the most carefully cultivated dimensions of our religious life are, apart from the cleansing of the gospel, insufficient to stand before the Holy One. But it should also produce in us the response of the cleansed Isaiah: the desire to be sent, the eagerness to declare the glory of the One whose holiness has undone and remade us, the readiness to say "Here am I. Send me." Let both responses, the undoing and the commissioning, be the emotional texture of your relationship with the holy God.

## C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

1. **Read R. C. Sproul's *The Holiness of God*.** This is among the most important works of popular theology produced in the twentieth century, and it is the most accessible and most transforming treatment of the subject available. If you have never read it, read it. If you have read it, read it again. Let its sustained encounter with the holiness of God do in your soul what it has done in the souls of countless readers: undo you at the level of self-reliance and rebuild you at the level of gospel dependence.
2. **Examine the quality of your worship for awareness of divine holiness.** One of the most practical tests of a congregation's theology is whether its corporate worship is shaped by the awareness of God's holiness. Is there a sense, in the worship you participate in, of approaching the holy God with appropriate reverence, awe, and the awareness of creaturely unworthiness? Is the gospel preached as the provision of the holy God for the need that His holiness creates? Or has worship been domesticated into entertainment, fellowship, and self-affirmation? Let the seraphic anthem of Isaiah 6:3 be the standard by which you evaluate the quality of your worship.
3. **Pursue personal holiness as the implication of the gospel, not the condition of it.** The call of 1 Peter 1:15–16 comes to people who have already been redeemed: "like the Holy One who called you, be holy." Holiness is not what you do to earn God's acceptance; it is what you become as the Spirit of the holy God does His transforming work in you. Identify one specific area of your life where the ethical holiness of God is most challenging your present practice, and commit to bringing that area into conformity with the character of the One who has called you.
4. **Use the holiness of God to guard against cheap grace.** The most common distortion of the gospel in contemporary Christianity is not a denial of grace but the cheapening of it, the reduction of the gospel to a transaction that requires

nothing of the recipient and produces no transformation in the life. The holiness of God is the most effective corrective to cheap grace, because it establishes that the grace of the gospel is the provision of the infinitely holy God for the satisfaction of His infinitely holy character, a provision that cost everything, and that has as its goal the conformity of the recipient to the holiness of the God who gave it.

5. **Preach and teach the holiness of God unapologetically.** In an age of therapeutic religion, therapeutic preaching, and therapeutic worship, the holiness of God is one of the most countercultural and most urgently needed truths the church can declare. Do not soften it. Do not apologize for it. Do not trade it for the approval of those who find it uncomfortable. Declare it with the same combination of awe and love that the seraphim declared it: Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD of hosts. And then declare the gospel that makes the encounter with that holiness not only bearable but transforming, the gospel of the coal from the altar, the blood of the Lamb, the One who bore our iniquity and whose stripes have healed us.

## D. For Every Season of Life

For the new believer: The holiness of God may be the attribute you have heard least about in contemporary Christianity, but it is the attribute that gives the gospel its weight, its necessity, and its glory. Your sin was not a minor inconvenience that God overlooked; it was an offense against infinite holiness that required infinite atonement. The cross is not a nice gesture; it is the only possible solution to the problem that divine holiness creates for sinful humanity. Let the holiness of God deepen your understanding of what Christ has done for you.

For the long-tenured saint: The danger of long exposure to the gospel is the loss of the Isaiah response, the collapse of self before the holy God that should accompany every genuine encounter with His presence. If your worship has become comfortable, your prayer has become casual, and your sense of the gravity of sin has diminished, return to Isaiah 6. Sit before the throne. Hear the anthem. Let the holiness press again upon your soul with its full weight. And let the cleansing that follows renew the consecration of a life that has begun to take grace for granted.

For the one who doubts God's goodness in the face of evil: The holiness of God is the ground of the answer to theodicy that no philosophical argument fully provides. The God who is Holy, Holy, Holy is constitutionally incapable of approving evil, His eyes are too pure to look on wickedness with favor. The evil that troubles you troubles Him more deeply than you can imagine, with a moral revulsion that is infinite in its intensity. And the God whose holiness cannot coexist with evil is the God who has acted, in the cross of His Son, to defeat evil at its root, and who will act again, in the return of His Son, to bring all things to the judgment that His holiness demands.

For the pastor and teacher: The opening lesson of Unit 5 on the communicable attributes is the most important of them all, because it establishes the theological framework within which every other communicable attribute must be understood.

Preach the holiness of God as the lens through which love, justice, grace, and wrath are all to be seen. Let Isaiah 6 be a regular text in your preaching cycle. Let the trisagion be a regular element of your corporate worship. And let your ministry be shaped by the conviction that the church which knows the holiness of God will also know the depth of the gospel, the gravity of sin, the necessity of grace, and the glory of the cross.

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## Study and Discussion Questions

### Opening Question

1. Have you ever had an experience, in worship, in prayer, in reading Scripture, where the holiness of God became genuinely and personally real to you, where you felt something of what Isaiah felt in Isaiah 6? What was the character of that experience, and what effect did it have on you? Share briefly with the group.

### Observation Questions (What Does the Text Say?)

2. Read Isaiah 6:1–8 carefully. Identify each element of the vision: the physical description of the throne room, the seraphim and their posture, the seraphic anthem, the physical phenomena that accompany the declaration, Isaiah's response, the seraph's action, the divine question, and Isaiah's answer. What does the structure of the passage, from vision to undoing to cleansing to commissioning, suggest about the pattern of genuine encounter with the holy God?

3. Read Revelation 4:1–8. Compare the heavenly throne room of Revelation 4 with the vision of Isaiah 6. What are the similarities and the differences? What does Revelation 4:8's addition of "who was and who is and who is to come" to the trisagion contribute to the declaration of divine holiness? What does the fact that the living creatures "do not cease" to say this declare about the character of divine holiness?

4. Read Habakkuk 1:12–13. What is the pastoral crisis that gives rise to Habakkuk's declaration in verse 13? Why is it significant that an affirmation of divine holiness ("Your eyes are too pure to approve evil") is used to raise a complaint about divine inaction in the face of evil? What does this tell us about the relationship between the holiness of God and the problem of evil?

### Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

5. Explain the twofold sense of divine holiness: ontological and ethical. How are these two dimensions distinct, and how are they inseparable? Which dimension is more fundamental, and why?

6. Why does R. C. Sproul argue that holiness is not one attribute among many but the attribute that qualifies all others? How does this claim illuminate the nature of God's love, justice, wrath, and grace specifically? What error does it correct in popular religious understanding?

7. What is the significance of the triple repetition of "Holy" in Isaiah 6:3 and Revelation 4:8? No other attribute of God in all of Scripture receives this treatment. What does the

trisagion declare about the relative importance of holiness among all the divine attributes?

**8.** How does the holiness of God provide the theological foundation for the necessity of the atonement? Why does divine holiness make the cross not merely wonderful but logically necessary? How does 2 Corinthians 5:21 express the connection between divine holiness and the gospel?

### **Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)**

**9.** Isaiah's cry "Woe is me, for I am ruined!" is the honest response to a genuine encounter with divine holiness. In what areas of your own life, your speech, your thought life, your motives, your private behavior, does the standard of divine holiness most expose your defilement? Is the response of Isaiah, honest acknowledgment of uncleanness followed by the reception of cleansing, a regular pattern in your relationship with God?

**10.** The call of 1 Peter 1:15–16 demands holiness "in all your behavior." Is there a significant gap between the holiness you affirm theologically and the holiness that characterizes the actual practices, habits, and patterns of your daily life? Identify one specific area where the call to comprehensive holiness is most urgently addressing you.

**11.** The lesson argues that the domestication of worship into entertainment, fellowship, and self-affirmation is a symptom of a deficient theology of holiness. How does your own experience of corporate worship reflect, or fail to reflect, the awareness of approaching the holy God? What changes in the worship practices of your church or personal devotion might more faithfully reflect the character of the God who is Holy, Holy, Holy?

**12.** Isaiah's encounter with the holy God ends not with paralysis but with commissioning: "Here am I. Send me." How does a genuine encounter with the holiness of God, the undoing and the cleansing, actually produce greater boldness and greater readiness for ministry rather than discouragement? How does the cleansing of the coal from the altar equip Isaiah for the very vocation that his unclean lips had made him feel unqualified for?

## Prayer Focus

Open your prayer by entering, as best you can, the atmosphere of Isaiah 6.

Acknowledge before God the throne room reality of His holiness: Lord, You are the high and exalted One, seated on the throne, the train of whose robe fills the temple. The seraphim cry without ceasing: Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory. And we, who are creatures of dust, draw near to that throne with the full awareness of what we are in the light of what You are.

Then pray Isaiah's prayer: Woe is me. Not as a performance of false humility, but as the honest acknowledgment of what the light of God's holiness reveals in us. Name the specific defilements, the unclean lips, the impure motives, the secret sins, the public inconsistencies between your profession and your practice. Bring them before the holy God, not to justify them or minimize them, but to lay them at the altar from which the coal of cleansing was taken.

Receive the cleansing of the gospel: Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven. The coal from the altar is the cross of Christ, the fire of divine holiness applied to the Holy One who stood in your place, so that His cleansing might be applied to you. Receive it. Rest in it. And then answer the divine question: Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us? Here am I. Send me. Let the encounter with the holy God end as Isaiah's ended: with the readiness of the cleansed and commissioned servant, prepared to declare the glory of the Holy One to a world that does not yet know Him.

**Soli Deo Gloria**

To God Alone Be the Glory

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## FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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