

§ 3. Doctrine of God
Lecture 18
God's Holiness

We've been talking about the personal attributes of God. We looked at God's intellectual attributes, his volitional attributes, and today we want to turn to God's moral attributes. The first of these that we want to address is holiness – the holiness of God. We want to first begin by looking at some of the scriptural data concerning God's holiness.

1. *God is the very standard of goodness.* This, it seems to me, is the implication of Romans 9:14-21. There he talks about the call of God upon the lives of Jacob and the rejection of Esau.

What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So it depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy. For the scripture says to Pharaoh, "I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy upon whomever he wills, and he hardens the heart of whomever he wills. You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me thus?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use?

Here Paul says that God's election is based upon God's own sovereign decision. He has mercy upon whom he wills; he hardens whom he wills. There is no higher court of appeal beyond God. One cannot bring God before the bar of some higher justice to say that this is unjust on God's part. Why? Because God is himself the highest court of appeal. God is himself the very standard of goodness and justice and righteousness. Therefore, he cannot be brought before any higher court of appeal or any higher bar of justice. God is not answerable to anyone because he is himself the standard of goodness and justice.

2. The Scriptures indicate that *God is absolutely holy*. Look at Exodus 3:3-5. This is the appearance to Moses on the part of God in the burning bush.

And Moses said, "I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt." When the LORD saw that he [Moses] turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here am I." Then he said, "Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

The presence of God made that hallowed ground so that Moses is told to take the shoes off of his feet because of the holiness of that place.

Leviticus 19:2: “Say to all the congregation of the people of Israel, ‘You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.’” Here God’s command to the people is that his holiness should be reflected in their lives.¹ They should be holy because God himself is holy.

Finally, in the very last book of the Bible, in Revelation 4:8 we read:

And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to sing, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!”

So God is absolutely holy. That then is the basis for the holiness that should characterize our lives.

3. *God’s holiness serves to expose man’s sinfulness.* Isaiah 6:1-5 is the vision of God that Isaiah had in the temple.

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called 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 shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Here the vision of God’s awesome holiness creates in Isaiah a deep sense of his own uncleanness and unrighteousness by comparison with God’s holiness. The awful purity of God serves to expose our own wickedness and inadequacy.

4. *God’s holiness separates man from God.* Look at the prophet Habakkuk, Habakkuk 1:13a. The prophet says of the Lord, “Thou who art of purer eyes than to behold evil and canst not look on wrong.” God’s eyes are too pure to behold evil. He cannot look upon wrongdoing because of his holiness. As a result, we (being wrongdoers and being unholy) are spiritually separated from him as a result. We cannot abide in his presence.

Isaiah 59:1-2 express this very well.

¹ 5:15

“Behold, the LORD’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you so that he does not hear.”

Here Isaiah says, *The problem isn’t on God’s part*. He is omnipotent. He is omniscient. He can hear your prayers. The failing isn’t with God. It is that your sin and wickedness have created this separation between you and God so that he does not hear your prayers.

So the holiness of God serves to separate sinful man from God’s fellowship and presence. God’s holiness disperses evil just as light disperses darkness. They cannot abide together.²

START DISCUSSION

Student: Is God above the law or is he subject himself to the law? Because if you look at what Christ said – *I didn’t come to abolish the law but to fulfill it*. You also have other instances in Scripture where God seems as if he is submitting himself to his own law.

Dr. Craig: Let’s hold that off until we get to the next section. Then we will discuss that. Certainly Jesus, as a man, was obedient to God’s law because he had a human nature and perfectly fulfilled the demands of the law. The question would be: as a divine person, does God submit to his own law? I will say something about that more in a moment.

Student: God’s holiness separates darkness from light. What I understand is that Jesus Christ brings us to him but he himself said, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” Am I understanding that right?

Dr. Craig: That Jesus Christ is the mediator between God and man?

Student: Absolutely. But you commented his holiness separates us from him because we are sinners. But then Christ himself being part of the Trinity helps us . . .

Dr. Craig: Yes, the Scripture says that we have redemption through the man Christ Jesus. By taking on human flesh and dying in our place he makes atonement for our sins so that breach between us and God can be healed and we can be forgiven of our sins and thus have fellowship with a holy God. Indeed, as we will see in a moment, we in Christ are constituted righteous and are declared to be righteous just like God. We will say something more about that in a moment.

Student: You said that God is the standard of holiness.

Dr. Craig: The standard of goodness.

Student: You've got these atheists that are always bad-mouthing God and they are very abusive toward God and his character – like Sam Harris just goes on a rant and tells us how terrible God is. This would be somewhat of an answer to that, right?

Dr. Craig: Yes, I do think that is correct. I think Paul, based on what he says in Romans 9, is that no one can indict God for wrongdoing. No one can cast aspersions on God's character because God is himself the standard of right and wrong. There is no higher court, no higher bar of justice to which appeal can be made before which God could be brought. I think Paul would say to Sam Harris, *Who are you, a man, to answer back to God?* God is himself the highest court of appeal. That raises some really interesting questions, as we will see in a moment. But at least I think that that is the implication of that passage in Romans 9.

END DISCUSSION

Let's take a look at a systematic analysis of this attribute.

Here, as has already been suggested, we confront what is called the "Euthyphro Dilemma." The Euthyphro Dilemma is named after a character in one of Plato's dialogues named Euthyphro. The dilemma basically goes like this: "Does God will something because it is good or is something good because Gods wills it?" If you say that something is good just because God wills it then that makes good and evil arbitrary. God just makes up what is right and wrong, and he could have declared that hatred is good and love is evil. Then we would be morally obligated to hate one another, and to try to do one another harm. That seems crazy that good and evil, right and wrong, are just arbitrary like that. So it can't be the case that the good is just whatever God wills.

But then if you say, no, God wills what is good then the good is independent of God.³ God lives up to the standard of goodness. What is good and evil is independent of God, and God always wills the right thing. He always wills the good thing. In that case God isn't the standard of justice and goodness. There is something beyond him to which God must conform. He has to, in order to be good, command things in line with what is good independently of him.

So the Euthyphro Dilemma has the implication that God cannot be the source of moral goodness. Either the good is independent of God and God just does what is good, or else good and evil are purely arbitrary and made up by God.

Christian philosophers, however, have exposed the Euthyphro Dilemma as a false dilemma. The two alternatives, despite first appearances perhaps, are not exhaustive. It is not as though you have to choose between A or not-A. This is like choosing between A and B, and there can be a third alternative C. In fact, in this case I think that neither of the

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two alternatives is correct, but they are not exhaustive. The correct alternative is to say, “God wills something because *he* is good.” That is to say, God is the standard of goodness. God is what Plato called The Good. He is, by his very nature, fair, loving, kind, compassionate, truth-telling, loyal, and so forth. He has all of these virtues as part of his essence, and therefore these goods are anchored in the being of God. They are goods because they are God’s properties – God’s virtues. God is The Good and he determines the standard of goodness. The Good is not something that is independent of God to which God conforms, nor is The Good based in God’s will – in his arbitrary decision. Rather, God himself is The Good and he is that way by his very nature.

When God gives moral commands to us, these are expressions of his perfectly good nature. These become our moral duties so right and wrong (moral obligation and prohibition) are based in the commands of a just and loving God. Good and evil is determined by God’s nature; right and wrong (our moral duties) are anchored in God’s will which is an expression of that nature and therefore not simply arbitrarily chosen.

What that would suggest then, in response to the earlier question, is God is not beneath the law. That would be the view that God somehow conforms to an independent moral law that exists apart from him. Rather, here I think the philosopher Immanuel Kant made a very helpful distinction between acting from duty or acting according to duty. God issues moral commands to us that constitute our moral duties or obligations. We act from duty. Duty, or obligation, is imposed upon us. When we do these things we do our duty. We act from duty. But when God does them it is not as though he is acting from duty because presumably he doesn’t issue commands to himself, right? So he doesn’t have any moral duties in a literal sense, but because of his perfectly good nature he acts in accordance with what would be moral duty. We act from duty, but God out of his very nature simply acts in accord with moral duty. But he doesn’t literally have moral duties because he doesn’t issue commands to himself, and commands are the source of our moral obligations. Obligations arise as a result of moral imperatives: “Thou shalt do this,” “Thou shalt not do that.” These moral imperatives come from a qualified authority; namely, God who is goodness itself.⁴

This view of the relationship between God and The Good is sometimes called “divine command morality.” That is to say, our moral duties are based in the commandments of God to us – they constitute our duties – but those commands are not arbitrary. That would be a sort of voluntaristic divine command theory which some Christian thinkers have held, but the majority would say, no, these commandments that he gives are expressions of his own essence. So it is impossible that God could have commanded, say, that hatred be good and love be evil because that would be to contradict his very essence. He is by

nature loving and so to issue such a command would contradict his nature which is logically impossible as we've seen.

START DISCUSSION

Student: How then do you respond to those who do charge God with the very thing that you said he can't do which is give an immoral command when in the message today [earlier sermon], Paul [the Pastor] was talking about Joshua where they were commanded to commit genocide basically against a people while they were commanded to wipe out everything within the city walls of Jericho. The objection that I hear about this divine moral command is you have the Old Testament replete with such commands where they were to slaughter every living thing – child, woman, pet, whatever. What is the response then to that?

Dr. Craig: If you'll look on our website ReasonableFaith.org I have a couple of questions of the week where I wrestle with this issue.⁵ What I try to do there is to defend an ethical theory that would allow God to be perfectly good and all-powerful and yet to issue these sorts of horrifying commands such as to go in and kill everyone in the city – men, women, and children. I think that the theory that I've laid out here allows us to understand that because if God is the source of our moral duties, that means that God could command a person to do something which, in the absence of a divine command, would have been sin. But given the divine command, it now becomes the right thing for that person to do. If the armies of Israel, for example, had just decided on their own to go in there and slaughter the people, that would have been wrong. It would have been murder or war crimes. But given a divine command, they now have a moral duty to do that. Therefore, they have the obligation to carry out that command, horrifying as it might be. God doesn't have the ability to command a person to sin, but he has the ability to command a person to do an action which, in the absence of a divine command, would have been sin.

The question then is: is it incompatible with God's nature as an all-loving compassionate being to issue such a command? I would say, in this case, no. Because these Canaanite tribes that God commanded the armies of Israel to drive out of the land and those who tried to remain behind and fight were to be exterminated were incredibly wicked. For four hundred years, the Bible says, God had stayed his hand of judgment upon these

⁵ See the following (links accessed July 29, 2015): Q&A #16, Slaughter of the Canaanites, <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/slaughter-of-the-canaanites> Q&A #225, The "Slaughter" of the Canaanites Re-visited, <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/the-slaughter-of-the-canaanites-re-visited> Q&A #331, Once More: The Slaughter of the Canaanites, <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/Once-More-The-Slaughter-of-the-Canaanites>

Canaanite tribes because, he says to Abraham, the iniquity of the Canaanites is not yet complete. So he allowed his people Israel to languish for four centuries in Egypt until the iniquity of these Canaanite tribes became so ripe for judgment that God then used the armies of Israel as his means of visiting judgment upon these peoples for their wickedness. He did nothing unjust in commanding the extermination of the adults, at least, in these Canaanite tribes because they were incredibly wicked and deserving of judgment. In the same way that centuries later God would use the pagan armies of Babylon to invade Israel and bring judgment upon his own people for their wickedness and evil.⁶

The really difficult problem then, it seems to me, is the children. How is it consistent with God's nature that he would command these Canaanite children be killed. Here what I would say is that God doesn't wrong these children in taking their lives early. God has the right to give and take life as he sees fit. No one can say to God, *You should have let me live longer. I have a claim on a long life.* Many people do die in infancy. It is God's prerogative when to terminate a person's life. He has the right to take the lives of these Canaanite children whenever he wants to. Moreover, if you believe as I do (and I think as Jesus did), in the salvation of small children then by bringing the deaths of these children early God ensured their eternal salvation. In other words, he conferred upon them an incommensurable good – eternal life, knowledge of himself. Whereas if these children had been allowed to live, especially in Canaanite culture, they would have been infected with the same poison as the adults and most of them would have been lost. Their deaths would actually mean their salvation. Those children, once in heaven, would be grateful that God had issued such a command to the Israeli armies to wipe them out.

It seems to me that there isn't anybody that God has wronged in this case. The adults deserved the punishment. The children are delivered from evil and given salvation for eternal life. So no one is wronged in bringing about the command. It is not inconsistent with God's compassionate and loving nature to issue such a command.

One more thing I would like to say. Why would God do this? I think that by issuing so horrifying a command God gave an object lesson to the people of Israel about the necessity of separating themselves from pagan gods and peoples in a way that they could not have learned otherwise. The whole system of the Old Testament law is based upon separating things. Not eating certain foods, some things are clean, others are unclean, don't mix linen and wool, other things are not supposed to be mixed. Over and over again, these ritual laws in the Old Testament emphasize not mixing things but separating them. These were meant to be object lessons to the people of Israel that they were set apart by God as a peculiar people holy and dedicated to himself. As such, they were not to mingle or compromise with the pagan peoples of Israel's neighbors. I think that this

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horrifying command to go in and drive out these Canaanite tribes and to exterminate any that tried to stay behind was an object lesson that God gave them about the importance of being this separated people holy and dedicated and set apart to the Lord.

We know that even this lesson in the end wasn't infallible. In fact, they fell with tiresome repetitiveness into the error of absorbing the worship of the gods of their pagan neighbors and inter-marrying with Canaanites and other people. So even this lesson didn't infallibly produce its result. But it does seem to me that that would give God a good reason to issue such a command.

That would be my defense of these commands. It seems to me that there is nothing here that is incompatible with God's being all-powerful and all-loving and moreover that it fits in with the divine command theory of ethics where whatever God commands you to do becomes your moral duty to do.

Student: How does that though absolve God from the acts of the Israelis when I could say and you could say and people have said throughout the centuries, "I am commanded by God to enslave these people or to kill these people"?⁷

Dr. Craig: I would say that it doesn't absolve God from what the Israeli armies did. On the contrary, they were his instrument. They were God's doing these things by the instrumentality of these armies. They were his means of judgment. Just as in the *Count of Monte Cristo* when Edmond Dantes seeks vengeance upon the three men who sent him into prison unjustly, he doesn't think of doing this out of personal animus or vengeance but he sees himself as the tool of God – the instrument of God – to bring about God's justice on these three men for their wickedness. In the same way, the armies of Israel are God's instrument by which he brings judgment on these people, in the same way that the pagan armies of Babylon centuries later were the instrument by which God judged his own people.

Now, the question you ask is one that people always ask – what about a jihadist? Muslim terrorists who say *God has given us this command to kill innocent men, women, and children in the name of Allah*. What about that? Doesn't this justify that? Not at all! Why? Not because the Muslim has the wrong moral theory, but because he has got the wrong god. Right? God has not issued those commands. He is worshiping a false god; a god whose character is vastly different from the God described in the New Testament. I actually think that the Muslim moral theory is correct so long as it is a divine command theory that is rooted in God's nature and not in his will. Islam tends to be very voluntarist. In Islam, Allah could act even contrary to his own nature. His omnipotence trumps everything. But insofar as the theory I've described is a divine command theory, that is not where I find fault with the jihadist. It is that he's got the wrong god. Of course

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this underlines all the more emphatically the importance that we are sure that we are worshiping and serving the right god, because if you are not you could be led into all manner of wickedness and terrible evil.

Student: One problem with the analysis is that we are told in several places in Scripture God is not a respecter of persons or God is not partial toward one person over another. You have two six month old children – one Israeli, one Canaanite – why would God treat them differently? My second point is: what do you think about the argument some people have made that the descriptions of the genocide of the Canaanite . . .

Dr. Craig: OK, let me just interrupt because both of you have used the word “genocide” and that is a pejorative label that opponents of the biblical view put on this. This is not genocide. It is not like what Adolf Hitler tried to do in the Second World War – exterminating a people. The command to the Israeli armies was to drive the Canaanite tribes out of the land. What he was doing was destroying these kingdoms as nation-states by divesting them of the land and giving it to Israel. It was now their land. This is what is so important to these Middle Eastern people – it’s the land. Even today when you go to Israel, Jews talk about going to “the land” – that is what they refer to Israel as. What was important here was that these tribes were now being divested of the land, they were being destroyed as nation-states by being driven out. It was only those that remained behind to fight that were to be killed and exterminated. There was no command to pursue these people and chase after them and wipe them all out. On the contrary, those who fled weren’t hunted down. They appear later on in the Scripture. This isn’t genocide. This is a command to drive the people out of the land and then only to kill those who remained behind in the land. That is terrible enough and horrible enough in itself, but it is not genocide. That is a real mischaracterization of this.

Student: So the two questions I had were first of all, the descriptions that God is not a respecter of persons, he is impartial.

Dr. Craig: Let me say something to that first because the time is waning and maybe you can save the second question for next week.⁸ That is a verse from James where he is talking about differentiating between rich and poor and we shouldn’t treat people with partiality because of their importance or their richness and stuff. But Romans 9 says God will have mercy on whom he has mercy, he will have compassion on whom he has compassion. So God is not under obligation to prolong anybody’s life just because he is, say, Israeli or to take anybody else’s because he is not. I think we have to say that it is up to a sovereign God how many years he gives us on this planet until he terminates our life. But I want to add this: God’s will is that for every human person he creates to be saved. So he wants to create a world in which sufficient grace for salvation is offered to every

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created person. The only reason that anyone would have failed to attain heaven and eternal life is because they freely reject God's grace and his every effort to save them. So God is not partial in that sense. He bestows sufficient grace for salvation upon every person that he creates and wants every person to be saved.

END DISCUSSION⁹