

c. Practical Application of God's Holiness

Last time we looked at the first aspect of God's moral righteousness – the holiness of God. I articulated a non-voluntaristic divine command theory of ethics according to which God is himself the highest good and is so essentially. His nature expresses itself toward us in the form of divine commandments which then constitute our moral duties. I suggested that this not only gives a satisfactory account of objective moral values and duties as grounded in God as the highest court of appeal, but it also enables us to understand in a consistent way the otherwise very troubling examples in Scripture where God commands people to do things which, if done under their own initiative, would have been sinful. I suggested that in cases like this God has the ability to command a person to do something which, had he not commanded it, would have been wrong. But given God's commandment, it becomes that person's moral duty to carry out. I suggested that these commandments are always consistent with God's own perfectly loving and compassionate and just nature, so we don't need to fear that God might completely upend the moral law and make hatred good and love evil, for example.

Let's move on to our application. What application does the attribute of God's holiness have to our lives? I think this is evidently of profound importance for Christian living.

1. *We should strive for personal holiness in our lives.* The holiness of God reminds us of how much God hates sin. Read the book of Revelation, for example, on the wrath of God. That is such a sobering reminder of God's hatred for sin and evil. For example,

Revelation 14:18-20 gives this terrifying image of the wine press of the wrath of God.

Then another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has power over fire, and he called with a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, “Put in your sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe.” So the angel swung his sickle on the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God; and the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse’s bridle, for one thousand six hundred stadia.

That is about two hundred miles! What a horrifying image this is of the wine press of the wrath of God flowing with the blood of its victims as high as a horse’s bridle for two hundred miles. This is an image that should remind us of how much God hates sin and is opposed to it. One sin kept Moses out of the Promised Land. One sin destroyed Ananias and Sapphira. We blink at sin because we don’t really think it is that bad. We think that God is like us, and he will simply wink at sin and overlook it.

Psalm 50:21 is an interesting verse in this connection. God is speaking here and he says, “These things you have done and I have been silent; you thought that I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you.” What was the problem the Jews had here? They thought that God was like them. They had small thoughts of God. They didn’t understand his terrible and awesome holiness. So he had been silent, and they thought everything was all right. But now he says he rebukes them and lays the charge in front of them.

Having said that, it is important to remind ourselves that God doesn't hate you; he hates your sin. God loves you. He loves you so much that he sent his Son to die for you. But he hates the sin that pollutes your life. Far from being something negative, the wrath of God is an expression of his holiness that is, I think, absolutely vital to a correct concept of God and to Christian living. Stephen Davis is a prominent Christian philosopher. I was struck by this paragraph in his book *Risen Indeed*. He says,

I think we ignore the concept of the wrath of God at our own cost. Indeed, I would argue for the radical proposition that our only hope as human beings is the wrath of God. (It is also true, of course, that our only hope is the grace of God, but that is another matter). The wrath of God shows that we do not live, as so many today suppose that we do, in a random and morally neutral universe. God's wrath shows us that right and wrong are objectively real, they are to be discovered, not created. The wrath of God is our only hope because it teaches us the moral significance of our deeds and shows us how life is to be lived.¹

So don't be afraid to affirm the wrath of God upon sin. This is an indication of his holiness and, as Davis says, the objectivity of right and wrong, which is our only hope in the world.

As those who are called to a righteous and holy life, *we need to strive for lives without blemish*. 1 Peter 1:14-16: "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in

¹ Stephen T. Davis, *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), p. 166.

all your conduct; since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” We are to strive for holiness in our lives which reflects the holiness of God. To live lives that are without blemish.

Here is the thing that we’ve discovered that is such an incredible irony or paradox of God’s economy. It is that *holiness is the secret to happiness*. So many people want to be happy. They will compromise morally or do things that the Bible says you shouldn’t do because, as they put it, *I just want to be happy*. But the truth of the matter is that happiness is like a will-o’-the-wisp. If you seek it directly – you try to be happy – it will always elude your grasp and you won’t find it. But if you strive for holiness, then in seeking to be holy, you will suddenly discover that happiness has crept up on you and is sitting there on your shoulder because you are doing the will of God. In Matthew 6:33 Jesus says, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.” We need to make it the focus of our lives to seek for God’s holiness in our lives. I really do believe that as we do that we will find that we are living lives that are deeply and profoundly happy. That is the first application.

The second application is that *in Christ God’s holiness becomes our justification*. For those outside of Christ, as we have just seen, God’s holiness is an awful terror. It is the source of the justice and the wrath of God which comes upon people who are separated from Christ. But, ironically, for those who are in Christ, God’s holiness becomes the source of their salvation. This was Martin Luther’s great insight into Romans 1:16-17. Let’s just read Romans 1:16-17:

For I am not ashamed of the Gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.”

Luther, as a Catholic monk, was obsessed with the holiness and the wrath of God, which filled him with terror. He strove to live a holy and righteous life, full of spiritual disciplines. But he could never rid himself of the terrible guilt that he felt he carried before a holy God. He realized he could never measure up. Despite his every effort, Luther was filled with terror before this holy God, until he saw that through faith in Christ the righteousness of God becomes our righteousness. As I am in Christ, his righteousness is imputed to me, and God sees me clothed in the righteousness of Christ himself. So that very holiness that once condemned me now becomes the source of my salvation.

Romans 3:21-26, I think, are some of the most profound verses in the New Testament – the heart of the Gospel.

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is

righteous and that he justifies [or makes righteous] him who has faith in Jesus.