

Holiness and the Character of God

John N. Oswalt, Associate Professor of Biblical Languages and Literature, Asbury Theological Seminary

A sermon delivered at Asbury Theological Seminary for the annual Holiness Emphasis Conference.

When a man or woman has finished a course of study at Asbury Theological Seminary, there ought to be a certain group of questions that are answered and a person ought to be able to say, “I know where I stand on these questions.” This doesn’t mean that a faculty should spend three years jamming students’ heads full of canned smarts which they will then go and spout off to various groups of people for 50 years and that that will be their ministry – not by any means. The Holy Spirit of God will lead them on a growing, expanding road down through the years, but there ought to be some foundation stones to which they can turn back and say, “I know where I stand there.” So I have tried to set forth some of these questions.

It would be arrogant of me to think that I could enumerate all the questions or that I could give to you in even a series of short messages all the answers. But at least I want to explore some of them with you and suggest to you how one may come at them in the light of the Word of God, and to encourage you to set out in the same light to find His answers for you on these questions. In this essay in a somewhat round-about fashion I invite you to consider at least three of these. First, what is the holiness of God? What do we mean when we say God is holy? Second, what are the expectations *vis á vis* that holiness for people? In what way does God’s holiness relate to you and me? And third, how is that holiness realized? Is it realized in an actual way, or only in a judicial way?

Suppose we begin by asking, “What does the Bible mean when it says God is holy?” Immediately it must be said that that statement is not an exclusive one with the Bible. The pagans said of their gods, “he/she/they’re holy.” Furthermore, the only class of persons in the Bible whose title bears the word ‘holy’ are prostitutes – male and female. It is

Character of God

difficult for us to imagine a Canaanite or a Hebrew farmer saying to his neighbor, "Let's go down the road and visit the holy girl." This would be an offense to all that we know and understand as holy. How could they say it? They could say it because "holy" originally meant simply that which pertains to a deity. If a being is a deity, he or she is holy. The word relates to that gulf which people across the world recognize to exist between the human and the divine. The person lost in the deepest and darkest paganism understands that there is something that cuts him or her off from any deity. So, in the first analysis, when we say God is holy we are saying there is a vast gulf fixed between Him and us.

Although the word "holy" does not appear in Genesis 28, that is what Jacob was talking about when he woke up that morning. He backed off from that stone and looked at it and said, "This is a terrible place. God is in this place and I didn't know it. I came thoughtlessly in here and went off to sleep and *God* was here." And the hair on the back of his neck began to stand up. When Moses went across that desert plain to look, as we all do, at a fire, and when he got close enough to see that this was a different kind of fire — one that used the bush as an agent and yet did not consume it — I do not think God had to tell him twice to take off his shoes. "This is a holy place. This is a place where God is, and I'm a human and I have no right to be trespassing here."

God is that One who is totally, utterly "other" than you and me; that One who stands over against me who is not a projection of my character or of my nature or of the world's character or its nature; that One who spoke the world into existence and will speak it out of existence, the Holy One. And the Hebrews across the years came to realize something — that there is only one God who is transcendent. And so with exquisite sarcasm Isaiah says, "What? That thing is holy? You've got to be kidding me! You go out into the woods and cut down a cedar log and bring it in and put half of it in the fire and cook your supper on it. The other half you carve into an image and overlay it with gold and fall down before it and say, 'My God.' You've got to be kidding me! (cf. Isa. 44:9-20) Oh, my pagan friends, if you had ever met God, you would not say of that thing, 'It is holy.'" There is only One and Isaiah had met Him, hadn't he? He is "other" than this world and when He walks across it, then we know we have been in the presence of the Holy One. He is the Holy One who breaks out of our little compartments in which we try to contain Him. He is "Other" than we.

But He is not merely the "Other" (and I owe this phrase to Dr. Dennis Kinlaw), He is *every person's* "Other." For you see, if He is not a

projection of my character, if He is not a projection of the world's character, if He is not in my control, then there He stands over against me in every moment of my life. He is the "Other" whom I can never escape. He is the "Other" who meets me on every street corner. He is the "Other" whom if I push out from the door will come back in through the window.

Whittaker Chambers, a convinced Communist, had long been certain that there was no God, but one Saturday morning, sitting at a breakfast table, he happened to begin to meditate on the convolutions of his little three-year-old daughter's ear, and he said, "Before long I was not looking at any ear, I was looking at the face of God." He is every person's "Other" who stands over against us, whom we must meet, if not this moment then the next moment, if not today, tomorrow. He is the Holy One.

So the Psalmist says, "If I took the wings of the morning." (Is not that a gorgeous phrase? I'm glad he didn't know anything about science and didn't say, "speed of light.") "If I took the wings of the morning and flew to the uttermost parts of the sea," (and to the Hebrew that was the end of the world), "you are there before I get there. If I make my bed in hell you are there. If I say 'Surely the darkness will cover me,' there is that unwanted hand on my shoulder saying, 'Hello.' For the darkness is light to you — you are the holy one." (cf. Ps. 139:7-12) Beyond our wildest imaginings, beyond our wildest dreams He is the Holy One.

But is that all "holy" means? The One who is "other" than me, the One with whom I have to do at every moment, the transcendent One, the separate One? No. For holy has to do with a certain character. When a person was dedicated, sanctified to a pagan deity they took on the character of that deity. If Baal consorted with beasts, they did. If Baal consorted with his own sex, they did. If Baal had no respect for human life, they had none either. They belonged to him and they shared his character. Can you imagine a cult prostitute saying to some Canaanite farmer as he walks into her little cell on some early morning, "I've decided I'm going to be celibate from here on." He would say, "You can't! Because you belong to Baal, you'll do what Baal does. You are holy to Baal." You have a character.

So when the pagan said, "My god is holy," he meant first of all, "He is a god." But that God has a certain character, and that which belongs to Him shares that character. You ask a person today who has dedicated his or her life to Satan, "Are you free to tell the truth?" "Oh, no,"

Character of God

would be the reply. “Oh no, you see, I’m sanctified to Satan. I belong to Satan and I share his character.” When I read, as again and again I do, that “holy,” “to be sanctified,” “to be holy,” only means “to be separate,” I wonder how a person who knows anything about religion can say that. To be holy to a deity is to share that deity’s character. And just as the Hebrews came to realize that there was only one transcendent being, they came to realize that there was only one holy character. Since there was only one God who had the right to say, “I am God,” His character is normative for all that divine character means forevermore. So today in the English language, the word “holy” has a very particular moral character about it because it represents the character of the one God; the one being who has the right to call Himself holy.

Israel came to the conviction that intrinsic to God’s character was purity – righteousness, faithfulness, steadfast love; and when they began to talk about holiness, about being holy, these were ultimately and intrinsically involved. Purity, faithfulness, steadfast love. Now how did they reach that conclusion? How did they decide that this is what the holy character of God was? I’ve said this with some who have been in my classes at various times, but let me repeat it at the risk of boring you. When I was writing my doctoral dissertation I had the opportunity to compare the Egyptian concept of God at the time of the Exodus with the Biblical concept of God. In the process of that study I discovered a very odd thing.

The Egyptians had masses and masses and masses of material speculating about the essence of God. However, when I came to the Bible there was not a scrap of speculation on God’s essence. Do you know what I found? “Thou shalt, thou shalt not, thou shalt,” and so on. I thought, “What’s this about?” Here in the earliest books of the Egyptians they speculate on who God is and where He came from and what He is made of, yet there is none of this among the Hebrews. Why?

Our problem is not that we need to know *what* God is, our problem is that we need to know *who* He is. This is God’s problem toward us, too. He has said, “I want you to know Me. I want you to know My character. I want you to know what I’m like. I want you to know what it means to be holy. But the problem is: how? Moreover, since we are estranged from Him by sin, abstract statements about His character are unlikely to penetrate our perverse wills. So He did not drop a philosophy book on us. Now that is not a slap at philosophy, but it is to say we can never truly know His character until we have sought to live it. If the world is to know what the holy God is like, the only way to do it is for people to live it.

And so in Exodus 19:6 you get the whole purpose of what all of these fireworks have been about. God said, "I will be your God and you will be my people, a nation of priests, a holy nation to me." He says, "This is what this was all about, this is what those plagues were about, this is what the Red Sea crossing was about, that you should share my character, and sharing it should then be the mediators of that character to a lost, broken world. This is what it's about. I'll be your God and you'll be my people." So he says, again and again, "You must be holy, as I am holy." The Law was the vehicle by which the Hebrews came to know the character of God.

But what does "you shall be holy as I am holy" mean? Can you not see somebody scratching his or her head and saying, "What? I'm supposed to be a god like God is a god? I'm supposed to be transcendent?" Well, to begin with, yes. I am to transcend, to transcend that nature in this world which is opposed to Him and against Him at every moment. I am to be "other" as compared to that, but oh, much more deeply I am to share His character. "Live in ways that are in keeping with what I am." And so you begin to go through the Law. And you run into all of these odd statements about clean and unclean, pure and impure. The stuff about how to get leprosy out of your house and how to get it off your washcloths. And you begin to say, "What in the world is that about?" But slowly even we, as slowly as the Hebrews, and perhaps a little more slowly, begin to get the idea that there is something about this God that stresses purity. You know, we get all tangled up in the connotations of purity. But purity is to be one thing.

Suppose I were to say to you, "I have a lump of pure gold here." What would I mean? It is all gold, not a mixture of gold and something else, but all gold. And so they began to understand that this God was not a mixture, this God was not inconsistent, this God was all of a piece, He was one, He was whole, He was pure. And they began to recognize that in this world there is that which is not whole, there is that which does not lead to wholeness, there is that which divides and destroys and defiles. There is that which leads to life, and there is that which leads to death; there is that which leads to health, and there is that which leads to corruption. And they began to say, "He is pure, He is clean." And in that covenant they said, "Yes, God we will do the things that lead to cleanness, that lead to purity, that lead to oneness, that lead to holiness."

They looked at that covenant and began to see these statements about rightness, righteousness. The holy God is holy in righteousness, Isaiah

Character of God

5:16 tells us. There is something in us as human beings that says it's a bent world, it's a world that is twisted, it's a world where the relationships are crisscrossed, but with the eye of the mind and of the heart we can dream of that which is straight, of that which is right.

Wonder of wonders, this God is what we've been dreaming of. This God is right. And He says to me, "If you are to live My life, then you must be right." That doesn't mean to be correct in every issue, but it means that somehow in my relationships with you and your relationships with one another, in our relationships with the world, there must be that about us which is right in a bent and crooked world. They lived in a world full of self-conceit and self-deceit. They looked at the covenant and said, "Yes, we will be right. We will live lives of righteousness, of rightness, for Your sake."

They looked at the covenant and they saw statements there about faithfulness. Again God had a problem. Here was a world lost in relativism (almost as far lost as ours). You see, with hundreds of gods, who is to say what is right and wrong? If it is right for this god to wear green, then it's wrong for that god. If it's right for this god to eat garlic, then it's wrong for that god to eat garlic. Who can say what is the truth?

Now what is God to do, knowing that He alone is the true God and that He has laid out a way for the world that is true? What is He to do? Bring out that philosophy book again? No. He comes to them with a string of promises – and keeps them. And they say, "This God is true, this God is true to His word! Who would have believed that? The one thing you know about a god is that he is as crooked as a dog's hind leg." In general, the one thing you know about a god is that you cannot trust him. But this God is true.

As a result, the words for truth and the words for faithfulness are the same words in Hebrew. You can't fight for truth and be unfaithful to your brothers and sisters. You either do the truth in your life, or all the truth in the world in your words is wasted. And they said, "*He* is true. *I* can be true. Oh, the thing I've longed for – to be faithful, faithful to others, faithful to myself, faithful to God – yes, Father, we'll do it."

Then they saw another thing running through that Law – the theme of steadfast love. The Hebrew word for this concept really can't be translated into English, but there are several different English renditions for this one word. They include "mercy," "grace," "love," etc. But none of these encompasses all that the word means. God says, "I am going to do *hesed* with you." What does it mean? He says, "I am going to

love you passionately, loyally, no matter what happens. I am on your side come hell or high water.” And they said, “Can it be true, can it be true that this Being would be loyal to me through thick and thin? That He’d be on my side? That He is for me and not against me? Can it be?” And He says, “Oh, yes, and that the world might know it, I want you to manifest that in your relationships with one another and with Me.” And they said, “We’ll do it.” That’s what all of that Law is about. This is the character of God and if the world is to know it then I want to belong to Him and I want to be like Him.

Now the thing that always fascinates me about those covenant ceremonies is the blithe way they jumped into it. When I read Exodus 21, 22, and 23 with their demands, it makes me shiver. I am glad I live in the age of grace. Yet when Moses says to them, “Will you do all this law?” they say, “Of course we will. Any time. After all, God delivered us from Egypt; what less can we do for Him?” So Moses took that basin of blood and splashed it on them, and I wonder if just the tiniest little shiver didn’t go through them as the drops of blood ran down their faces. “What have I let myself in for?” must have been a question which suggested itself to them.

You see it again at the end of Joshua. There they had been, they had gone through the wars, the defeats, the victories, the internal tensions, the difficulties, and now Joshua says, “I am going on and here is the covenant. Here is what you’ve committed yourself to. You will belong to this God and you will manifest His character in all of your lives. Will you do that?” And they said, “Sure.” And Joshua said, “You can’t.” I imagine that set them back on their heels a little bit. “What do you mean? You just asked us if we would. We said we would and now you say we can’t.” “He is a jealous God and a holy God and if you turn from Him He’ll destroy you.” Oh, not because He is mad, but because He is a consuming fire and you don’t go running around sticking your arm in the middle of a blast furnace without thinking a little bit beforehand what the implications are. Joshua says, “He’s God, don’t you realize what you’re saying?”

And quickly enough they began to learn. All of the rest of Old Testament history is the indication that Joshua was right and they were wrong. The Old Testament is a tragedy, for they discovered that although they could blithely say, “Oh sure, we’ll live out God’s character any day of the week,” they discovered that there was that within them that prevented it. And they began to say, “We know the way, but we can’t do it. We’ve tried, but somehow something within us prevents us

Character of God

from doing what we know. The Law is a good thing, a glorious thing, a wonderful thing. We love God that He would share the way of life with us, but we can't do it."

The finest explanation of this in the Old Testament is found in Psalm 51. There is the man who had his eyes brutally opened and he says, "Oh, God. I never knew myself before. I never knew the depths within me. Now, oh God, can your mercy, can your grace, can your cleansing do something for me?" And this Psalm is the cry of the whole Hebrew people. First, it is, "God, create in me a clean heart. Oh, I said I'd live a clean life, but it won't happen unless you create that single heart, that clean heart, that heart that leads to life and not death." Create a clean heart.

Then he says, "Oh, God, can you make anew in me a right spirit? With my mind I say, 'yes, Lord, that's right, that's what I want to be. That's what I want to do,' but I cannot." Again he says, "Oh God, God can you make me know truth in the inward part? Oh, I want to keep faith. I want to be faithful to people. I want to be true in what I do with others." And let me say, it is one thing to be true in what we say, it is another thing to be true to others. "Oh, God," (And I love that statement in the Law, "Blessed is he who sweareth to his own hurt.") "I'll take an oath and I'll keep it even if it's to my disadvantage, to my own hurt, because I'll be true to You." And finally, "Oh, God, can you give me a free spirit? There's something bound, there's something tied up in me. God, can you set me free?"

That is the cry in the Old Testament of persons brought face to face with the fact that although they want to live this kind of life – the life of God – they cannot. So the result is that they were not a holy nation. The result is that they did not sanctify God, but rather profaned Him. Do you know that's what God says of Moses? He says, "Moses, you didn't sanctify me," and if I had been Moses, I would have said, "Huh, me? Sanctify You? You're the One that's supposed to sanctify me. He meant, "Moses, you didn't show Me in My holiness." Did you notice what Moses said? "Must we bring water from the rocks?" "You didn't show Me as I am and that's the whole purpose of this long, long business, Moses, that the world might know Me as I am." Moses, had he gone on in that way and led the people into the land, would have been the next electoral candidate for God.

The same kind of point is made, "You have profaned My name, you haven't shown Me as I am, you've shown Me as I'm not. You've made Me appear unfaithful; you've made Me appear untranscendent, unpower-

ful; you've made Me appear to be a tame little god who can be dragged around here and there. You are not a holy nation." (cf. Ezk. 36:20 ff.) Here, the whole purpose of the Exodus is frustrated. The solution, then, to this situation – in which a nation which has known the way, which has attested to the rightness of that way with its mind but cannot live it – the solution to that is not merely forgiveness and propitiation of the righteous anger of God. To say, "All right, now Isarel you are forgiven, I have made a way by which I can forgive you and by which My righteous anger may be propitiated," is merely to put them back to "Go." God's purposes can only be realized in the nation of Israel if they are not only forgiven but if they are enabled to live that life which they have longed to live. And so you come to the end of the Old Testament. You see the Old Testament rising on tiptoe as it were. Oh, God, somehow, somehow, there must be an inner dynamic to overcome this inner resistance. Somehow, oh God, you've got to make it possible to live the life of your character.

In several places the Old Testament looks forward to this inner dynamic. The passage in Ezekiel 36 where God said, "You've profaned my name," also has Him saying, "I'm going to give you a new heart. I'm going to put a new spirit within you. I'm going to cause you to walk in my ways. I'm going to cause you to dwell in the land and you will be my people and I will be your God." The 'new' exodus is going to be achieved, but it can only be achieved when the people are both forgiven and have experienced a change within them.

Similarly, Jeremiah speaks of the new covenant which will be written on their hearts. The old covenant was external and the people said, "Yes, it's good. We want to do that. We want to be that, but for all of our lives it has stood outside of us with us striving to reach it." "Now," says Jeremiah, "the next one is going to be written from the inside out." Oh God, grant it. Malachi, the last book in the Old Testament says, "He's coming. The Messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, He's coming." But do you remember the words of the Messiah: "Who can stand when he appeareth?" For He is like a refiner's fire and He says He is going to refine the sons of Levi – He's going to put the gold in the crucible and He's going to start putting the fire on it. To destroy it? No. To make it what it's never been.

The Old Testament by itself is an incomplete book. It is so because it looks beyond itself. It is a story of frustration, of a people striving and reaching and struggling and saying, "Oh, God, can you forgive us for the past and can you empower us for the future?" And the answer,

Character of God

the answer of the prophetic passages are ringing yet. "Yes, I'm coming and I'm going to deal with the past and with the future."

And where do we stand in relation to this? Is there a standard that we approve with our lips and deny with our lives? Oh, God, You are holy, and Your holiness is not merely Your "otherness" standing over against me. Your holiness is a character, a character of life which the world is dying for, and oh, God, I would be of that sort; oh, God, for me as well as for the Jew. God, is there an inner dynamic which can make me one, which can make me pure, one in all of my attitudes toward others? Is there an inner dynamic which can make me right, straight, in a bent world?

Some of us were talking today about the temptations which come to a person in roles of Christian leadership. Not normally temptations to what we think of as physical sins, but oh, the temptation to get hold of power, to be someone, to be known, to be on a first name basis with those who have the reins. And in that kind of a situation, unless God has done something within you and me to make us right, too often we have sold our soul before we know what the price was.

Oh, God, can You make me true, true from the depths of my heart? Oh, God, can You set me free, free to love? That's what it's about. That is what God's holiness is. And that is what the expectations are for you and for all those who would be His. And the glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ is that now, now holiness, the character of God worked out in your life and mine, is ours for the asking, for the taking, to manifest the character of God in a world which knows Him not. That is what it is to be a minister of Jesus Christ. Sermons, yes; committees, yes; programs, yes; but *character, yes!*