

Marc Roby: Before we begin today, Dr. Spencer and I want to wish all of our listeners a blessed 2019. It is our prayer that God will draw you to himself and build you up in the most holy faith. We would love to hear how he is using this podcast in your life and invite you to email your questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org.

And now let's resume our study of systematic theology by continuing to examine God's communicable attribute of holiness. Last time we looked at God's revelation to the prophet Isaiah. Dr. Spencer, how do you want to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to spend some more time on the revelation given to Isaiah, but with a different emphasis. Last time we focused on the impact God's holiness has on us as sinful creatures.

Marc Roby: Which is that it should drive us to our knees in fear and trembling and cause us to cry out with the Philippian jailer, "What must I do to be saved?"¹ (Acts 16:30)

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly the response we should have. But today I want to focus more on what this attribute tells us about the being of God.

Marc Roby: We already know that his holiness means he is separate from his creation, and that he is morally perfect.

Dr. Spencer: In fact, as we discussed in Session 71, God is the ultimate standard for what is morally right, just as he is the ultimate standard for what is true or what is good. There is however, more that we can learn about the being of God from his holiness. But before we get into that, it is important to note that this is the only attribute of God ever repeated three times in the Bible. Remember that in Isaiah 6:3 the seraphs were crying out, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty".

Marc Roby: And that repetition is for emphasis, right?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. We do the same thing. For example, someone might describe a certain task as not just being difficult, but being very, very difficult. But here we have the word holy repeated three times, which is why you sometimes hear God referred to as the thrice holy God. It is a little bit like our printing something in bold italics and underlining it. We really want that thing to stand out. And so, God wants his attribute of holiness to stand out. The Bible never once refers to God as "love, love, love" or "wrath, wrath, wrath" or "mercy, mercy, mercy" for example. We need to be careful of course to not think that God's holiness somehow diminishes the importance of his other attributes, but we clearly need to take it very seriously.

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Marc Roby: One indication of the importance of holiness is that in 1 Corinthians 1:2 the apostle Paul describes those to whom he is writing as “those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy”.

Dr. Spencer: Very true. As we noted last time, Hebrews 12:14 tells us that “without holiness no one will see the Lord”. This is a common emphasis all through the Bible. God is holy and his people must be holy. And God is in the business of making us holy. In Ephesians 5:25-27 the apostle Paul commanded, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.”

Marc Roby: There is a lot packed into those two verses.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, there is. First, we see that Christ “gave himself up” to make the church holy, which speaks about his sacrificial death. Then, secondly, we read that he is cleansing his church “by the washing with water through the word”, which speaks about our being sanctified through reading and obeying the Bible, which is the word of God. And, thirdly, we see that Christ is going to present the church “to himself”. Interestingly, in John 10:29 and again in John 17:24 Christ refers to his people as being given to him by the Father. So both are true; God the Father gives us to the Son and God the Son purifies us to present us to himself. It is hard to grasp, but we are the Father’s gift to the Son.

Marc Roby: It is astounding grace that the Son would want such a gift!

Dr. Spencer: I agree. But it is a little easier to understand when you realize that he doesn’t want us just the way we are. He wants us the way we *will* be when he is done working in us. Jesus Christ will not be our Savior if he is not also our Lord. And as our Lord he is at work transforming us. In Romans 8:29 we read that “those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” This being conformed to the likeness of Christ is the process of sanctification, which all true believers go through. We will talk about this more in our next session, but for now I want to focus on this idea that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Marc Roby: Which is not something many modern churches talk about.

Dr. Spencer: You’re right about that. There is a completely unbiblical idea that is very common in the modern church, which says that I can accept Jesus as my Savior without also having him as my Lord. But there are two fatal problems with that thinking. The first is that Jesus Christ *is* the Lord of the universe whether we acknowledge that fact or not.

Marc Roby: And even if we don’t choose to voluntarily acknowledge that fact in this life, we will when it comes time for judgment. Philippians 2:9-11 tell us that “God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Dr. Spencer: That is a scary thought; if you reject Christ now, on the day of judgment you *will* confess him as Lord and then go to hell. But getting back to our topic, the second fatal problem with the thinking that Jesus can be your Savior without being your Lord is that the Bible makes it absolutely clear he *must* be your Lord or you do not belong to him and he did not die for you. In Matthew 7:21 Jesus himself told us that “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” We can *call* Jesus Lord, we may think he is our Savior, but on the day of judgment only those who have *done* the will of the Father enter the kingdom of heaven. In other words, only those who have obeyed.

Marc Roby: Jesus also said in John 14:15, “If you love me, you will obey what I command.”

Dr. Spencer: That is the same idea. We could go on, but we made this point before and will get to it again in our next session, so for now let me just say that the biblical case is so strong that if one of our listeners is struggling with the idea that obedience is necessary, my best counsel is to take a week and sit down and read through the New Testament, making note of how many times and in how many ways it says that you must obey if you are God’s children.

We are saved by grace alone through faith alone, our works play no part in earning salvation. But if we are not living a changed life, striving for obedience out of love for God, then we have not been changed. We are not born again, and we will not be in heaven.

Marc Roby: And that fact is intimately linked with the holiness of God since heaven is where God is in the fullest sense.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. James Boice, in his book *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, points out that the Bible “calls God *holy* more than anything else. *Holy* is the epithet most often affixed to his name. Also we read that God alone is holy.”² Now, in saying that God alone is holy he is referring to the first meaning we have discussed for the word holy; namely, that of separation from creation. And that is why I wanted to spend some more time on this attribute, I want to emphasize this dominant aspect.

Boice points out that people tend to think of holiness mostly in terms of morality and, therefore, as something that admits to degrees. One person can be a little more or less holy than someone else.

Marc Roby: When we do that, it is our natural, that is to say sinful, tendency to pick particular behaviors to focus on so that we come out on top.

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly what we tend to do. If someone has no trouble with putting on weight, there is a tendency for that person to be judgmental toward those who are overweight. If we have been blessed with good jobs and financial security, it is easy to look down on someone who has troubles with personal debt. And the list can go on and on. I am not diminishing the fact

² James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pg. 125

that gluttony and fiscal irresponsibility are sins, but I think you get my point. Our natural sinful tendency is to minimize our own sins and to be more judgmental toward the sins of others.

Marc Roby: And such thinking leads to thinking less of other people and more of yourself, which is the opposite of true Christian character.

Dr. Spencer: And when people think about holiness only in these terms, they also tend to think of God as just better than they are, but not completely different than they are. But the reality is that he is radically different – it isn't just a matter of degree. Which is why Isaiah was undone when he saw God as we learned in our last session.

Marc Roby: And while Isaiah's experience may be the most exalted view of God given to anyone in the Bible, he was not the only person who had the experience of coming face-to-face, so to speak, with the holy God. I am thinking of Job's confrontation with God, where Job declared, in Job 40:4-5, "I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer— twice, but I will say no more."

Dr. Spencer: That is another great example. Putting his hand over his mouth was a polite way of saying that he shut up. And in Job 42:5-6 he proclaimed "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

We must come to grips with what is truly meant by the holiness of God, and when we do, we too will be quiet and repent. Boice writes that "in its original and most fundamental sense, *holy* is not an ethical concept at all. Rather it means that which is of the very nature of God and which therefore distinguishes him from everything else. It is what sets God apart from his creation. It has to do with his transcendence."³

Marc Roby: And to be transcendent means to go beyond normal limits or to be beyond comprehension, or to not be subject to the limitations of our physical universe.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, those ideas can all apply. Boice goes on to say that holiness "is the characteristic of God that sets him apart from his creation. In this, holiness has at least four elements." And he then goes on to present the four elements, which he says are: first, majesty, second, will, third, wrath and fourth, righteousness. The fourth element, righteousness, refers to the moral aspect of holiness and we don't need to spend more time on that now.

Marc Roby: And majesty is also fairly clear. It refers to having sovereign power and authority, great dignity or grandeur. But what does Boice mean by saying one element of God's holiness is will?

Dr. Spencer: I would summarize this point by saying that he is referring to the fact that God has personality. He wants to avoid any cold notion of holiness as an abstract concept. We must remember that God is personal. He has his sovereign will and he acts in accordance with it. For

³ Ibid, pg. 126

example, as we saw a couple of minutes ago from Philippians 2:9-11, it is God's will that every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Marc Roby: Alright. What about wrath? I doubt that many of our listeners would have mentioned that as an aspect of God's holiness.

Dr. Spencer: I'm sure that quite a few would have left that off of their list. But many others agree with Boice on this point. Wrath is, as Boice put it, "an essential part of God's holiness"⁴. He also points out that we must guard against thinking of God's wrath in human terms. It is not an emotional response to some personal affront. Boice writes that "It is, rather, that necessary and proper stance of the holy God to all that opposes him."⁵ R.C. Sproul wrote that "If there is no wrath in God, then there is no justice in God. If there is no justice in God, then there is no goodness in God. And if there is no goodness in God, then there is no God. A God without wrath is not God."⁶

Marc Roby: That's a very strong statement. But I see the logic. I think it could be rephrased by saying that in order to be just, God must punish sin, which means he must have wrath in the sense that Boice noted, namely that of being the "necessary and proper stance of the holy God to all that opposes him."

Dr. Spencer: I think that's a fair restatement. And it agrees with what God tells us in his word. In Romans 3:25-27 we read in part that "God presented him [meaning Christ] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, ... so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus." In other words, sin, which is opposition to God, must be punished for God to be just. Jesus Christ died on the cross as a substitute for his chosen people, which is called substitutionary atonement. He took the punishment that they deserved, which satisfies God's wrath and allows God to declare those who are united to Christ by faith just, meaning that the penalty due them for their sin has been paid.

Marc Roby: I remember we mentioned these verses in Session 73 as a great example of God's justice, love and wisdom all working together.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we did mention them then. And we could have mentioned God's wrath as well, because his wrath is not only an aspect of his holiness, but it is also obviously intimately linked with his justice. Sin must be punished by a holy and just God because it is opposition to him and he is the sovereign Lord.

Marc Roby: You mentioned before that Jesus is Lord whether people acknowledge that fact or not.

Dr. Spencer: And the lordship of God is a fundamental aspect of who God is, although that statement doesn't do his lordship justice, it is far more than just an aspect of who God is. As the

⁴ Ibid, pg. 128

⁵ Ibid

⁶R.C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess: A Layman's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*, P&R Publishing Co., 2006, Vol. 2, pg. 283

Creator and Judge of the universe he has created, he can't be anything other than the Lord of his creation. The theologian John Frame writes that "*God's lordship is grounded in his eternal nature, and therefore in his attributes.*"⁷

Frame has an interesting discussion about God's attributes in *The Doctrine of God*. He writes that "*We should think about God's attributes as servants, within the covenant relationship.*"⁸ I don't want to go too far off track here, but his point is that as creatures we think about God in language and concepts that we can understand, but at the same time these are based on God's revelation to us, so they tell us things about God that are true.

Marc Roby: And, to stay on track with our current discussion, God certainly does reveal himself as holy, in fact thrice holy as we have seen in Isaiah 6:3.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's right. And although God's lordship can be related to a number of God's essential attributes, I think it is natural for us to talk about it in the context of his holiness because God's holiness speaks about his being completely set apart from his creation, and by definition lordship also speaks about being completely set apart, to be more specific, to be above, to be in control.

Marc Roby: It sounds as though we are getting ready to switch topics. Talking about God's holiness in terms of his being separate from his creation has led us to the concept of his lordship.

Dr. Spencer: We are about ready to switch, but we'll have just a bit more to say about holiness next time first.

Marc Roby: Alright, I look forward to that, but we're out of time for today.

⁷John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, P&R Publishing Company, 2002, pg. 388

⁸ *Ibid*, pg. 390