

1 Samuel 2:1-2
God's Holiness
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I am continuing my sermon series on the very nature of God. Worshipping God and serving God and submitting to God are our greatest privileges in life and also our greatest sources of an inner satisfaction that is substantial and lasting. Trusting God, depending upon God, and resting in God are as vital to our leading a meaningful and productive life as abiding in a vine is vital for a branch's bearing fruit. One way to strengthen our devotion to God and our faith in God is to meditate on God's revelation of Himself to us. Because God is eminently worthy of our trust and eminently worthy of our worship, then the better we know Him, the more freely and zealously we will worship and trust Him.

In previous sermons, we have looked upon God as the great I AM. We examined the account of Moses at the burning bush where God revealed the meaning of His name Jehovah. The name Jehovah reveals God's covenant loyalty and faithfulness, God's dependability. When God tells Moses that the name Jehovah means "I AM what I AM," God is saying that He is still the same God who made His covenant promise to Abraham, and thus He is going to fulfill that covenant promise. Because God doesn't change, we can today depend on the promises God made yesterday. Jehovah God is the unchanging Rock upon which we can firmly rely. As we read in Hebrews 13:8 regarding the

divine Jesus, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever."

We have considered God as a jealous God. God is like a king who has married an humble, impoverished peasant girl and made her his queen. He has elevated his wife to a position of honor and wealth and privilege. He is jealous of her in the sense that he wants her to be faithful to this marriage covenant because she has so much to gain through this marriage and so much to lose by abandoning this marriage. God is jealous for His people's worship in the same sense that a truly loving husband has an ardent desire for the loyalty of his wife to their marriage covenant. This zeal for their marriage relationship is proper and good, and what he desires is also what is truly best for his wife as well.

We have considered some of God's incommunicable attributes. These are attributes which we as creatures do not and can not share in any sense. God is uncreated, and we are creatures whose existence has a beginning and whose existence God must uphold on a moment by moment basis. God is eternal, and we are creatures who experience life as a linear flow of time and as a series of events which one by one bring changes into our lives. God is omnipresent, and we are localized creatures who can be only one place at a time. As we think about these transcendent attributes of God, we are reminded how high above us God really is. We are reminded that though we can know God as He has revealed Himself to us, we will never be able to comprehend Him. We are reminded of the privilege of worshipping God and of the insanity of rebelling against God through sin.

Today we are going to continue meditating upon God by considering one of God's communicable attributes. First I want to discuss again the distinction between God's communicable and incommunicable attributes. I want to do this today by considering two questions and answers in our Shorter Catechism. First, I want to consider question four:

Q.4. What is God?

A. God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

Now I don't know if this is intentional or not, but I have noticed that this list of attributes is divided into communicable and incommunicable attributes. "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, ..." These three attributes, infinity, eternity and immutability, are incommunicable attributes. As localized creatures, we are not infinite. As temporal creatures, we are not eternal. As mutable creatures, we are not unchangeable. These attributes are uniquely true of God. These attributes are totally foreign to us.

The Shorter Catechism then goes on to list seven attributes of God: "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." These last seven attributes are communicable. These are attributes which we can in some sense share. God exists, and we exist. God is wise, and we can be wise. God is powerful, and we can be powerful. God is holy, and we can be holy. God is just, and we can be just. God is good, and we can be good. God is truth, and we can be true. We can possess these attributes in

some sense, even as God possesses them. Yet even here there is an incommunicable element. Though we can possess these attributes, we cannot possess them as God possesses them. We exist and God exists, but God exists infinitely, eternally and unchangeably. We have power, and God has power, but God has power infinitely, eternally and unchangeably. We can be holy, and God is holy, but God is holy infinitely, eternally and unchangeably. We can be just and God is just, but God is just infinitely, eternally and unchangeably. We can be good, and God is good, but God is good infinitely, eternally and unchangeably. We can be true, and God is truth, but God is truth infinitely, eternally and unchangeably. You see, God possesses even His communicable attributes in a mode affected by His incommunicable attributes. We possess the communicable attributes in a mode affected by our very creatureliness. We possess the communicable attributes not as identical clones of the divine originals but as creaturely analogies of the divine originals.

I also want to examine Shorter Catechism question ten:

Q.10. How did God create man?

A. God created man, male and female, after His own image, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, with dominion over the creatures.

Humanity possesses these communicable attributes of God on a creaturely plane because humanity is created in the very image of God. Now I mentioned in a previous sermon that some take our creation in the image of God to refer to the physical form of our bodies. This means that God has literal arms and legs and

hands and eyes and so on. Now how do we know that this is not the correct interpretation? We can know this by following the guideline on interpretation which we find in the first chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith:

The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture ..., it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

In Paul's epistle to the Colossians, there is a statement of the restoration of the image of God in humanity at salvation. Paul there relates that restoration of the image of God not to plastic surgery but to the obtaining of true knowledge:

Colossians 3:9-10

- 9 Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds,
10 and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him,

There is a parallel passage in Paul's epistle to the Ephesians which mention in this regard true righteousness and holiness:

Ephesians 4:24

- 24 and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.

The teaching of these two verses on the restoration of the image of God in humanity at salvation is the basis for our Shorter

Catechism's defining the image of God as involving knowledge, righteousness and holiness. And knowledge, righteousness and holiness are communicable attributes which humanity possesses on a creaturely plane.

Now let me say something about how important it is that we understand this concept of communicable attributes correctly. When Satan tempted Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, he tempted them not to be satisfied with the creaturely analogies of God's communicable attributes. Satan tempted Adam and Eve to lust for the divine originals. One of the communicable attributes is knowledge. God knows, and we know. Yet we do not know as God knows. God knows originally, definitively and sovereignly. We know in a secondary dependent sense. God defines, and we learn that definition, submit to it, and build on it. God thinks and we think God's thoughts after Him. Satan told Adam and Eve that that was not good enough. He said that they needed to become what some call "free thinkers." They needed to think originally and sovereignly and definitively for themselves. They needed to define for themselves what is right and what is wrong, what is true and what is false, what is good and what is bad, what is beautiful and what is ugly. Satan said, Do that, and you will be like God. Trying to be like God in that improperly proud sense is the very essence of sin.

When Jesus saves us, He restores what is called the moral aspect of the image of God within us. The moral aspect of the image of God within us is our inner desire to use all of our God given gifts and abilities for the glory of God. After Jesus restores the moral aspect of the image within us through regeneration, we no longer covet divine prerogatives and we are grateful to be

creatures created in God's image for His glory and service. Our chief desire and aspiration in life becomes to please God, and thus we find ourselves.

We are today going to examine one of God's communicable attributes, and that is holiness. We will do so under three headings: peerless divinity, privileged relationship and moral purity. First, we will consider peerless divinity.

Now holiness is a communicable attribute of God. In Scripture, God repeatedly commands, Be holy, for I am holy. And yet there is also a sense in which only God is holy. In our Scripture reading for today, Hannah says in her prayer, "No one is holy like the LORD, for there is none besides You, nor is there any rock like our God." There is a unique sense in which God is holy. In this sense, holiness is a synonym for God's peerless divinity.

When we think of holiness, we tend to think primarily of moral purity. That is a part of the meaning of the word, but that is not the word's most basic meaning. The most basic meaning of holiness is separation. God is holy in a special and ultimate sense in that God is in a category all to Himself. God is absolutely unique, and in this sense God is separate from all the rest of reality. This is the sense of holiness which Paul is thinking about when he says that God dwells in unapproachable light and that no man has seen God or can see God. This is the sense of holiness which the Gospel of John is referring to in the statement "No one has seen God at any time." This aspect of holiness is why God responded as He did when Moses asked to see God's glory:

Exodus 33:18-23

- 18 And [Moses] said, "Please, show me Your glory."
19 Then [God] said, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion."
20 But He said, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live."
21 And the LORD said, "Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock.
22 "So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by.
23 "Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen."

When we think about holiness, we should think first and foremost about God in this high and holy sense. In terms of His absolute holiness, God is to us like the core of the sun. We can know the sun through the rays of the sun which bring heat and light to the earth. Yet we cannot experientially know the core of the sun, which is a nuclear inferno. No man can experience the core of the sun and live. That is the sense in which no one can see God and live. No one can see God in the inner essence of His existence and survive the experience. We can know God only as He reveals Himself to us. And though we cannot see God directly in His ultimate essence, we know His revelation of Himself to us is true.

In this ultimate sense of the word, God is holy even in relation to the brightest of the seraphim and even in relation to the most glorious of the cherubim. Even the angels burning in the brightness of glory cry out to God, "Holy, holy, holy!"

There is, of course, a secondary sense in which God is holy, and that is God's moral purity. This is separation in the sense of separation from sin. As the prophet Habakkuk said, God is too pure to look upon iniquity. Now this doesn't mean that there is some moral code that is more basic than God and to which God conforms. No, God's moral purity is the unchangeable nature of God. God's holiness in the sense of moral purity is simply what God is, and what God is is the ultimate measure of moral purity. God's moral law or God's revealed will is simply God's explanation of living within God's creation in a way which is consistent with God's moral purity. Even in the sense of moral purity, God's holiness is special. We are holy in this sense when we meet the standard, but God not only meets the standard, He is the standard.

Now let's look at the second heading, which is privileged relationship. When Adam and Eve sinned against God, their sin affected the whole earth. Now the world is a morally polluted place under a curse. Yet God in His grace comes into the world and establishes relationships. Heaven is holy in this sense because God there has a special manifestation of His glory and grace. When Moses came to the burning bush, the Angel of the LORD commanded Moses to take off his shoes because he was standing on holy ground. That ground was holy because God had chosen to be there in a special manifestation of His glory and grace. When Israel left Egypt and came to Mount Sinai,

Mount Sinai was a holy place for a time in the same sense. When God's Shekinah glory descended first into the tabernacle and later into the temple, those structures became holy buildings. And when God chose Israel to be His people, Israel became God's holy nation.

In the age of the new covenant, the only temple is the heavenly temple, and there are no holy places on earth. Yet God still has a holy nation, a covenant people. We read in the New Testament that God's holy nation in this age is His church. Because the church has this covenant relationship with God, the church is separate from the world and thus holy in this relational sense. Paul is referring to holiness in this sense in 1 Corinthians seven when he says that the Christian's children are holy. Those who are in the church are in a covenant relationship with God, and that is a special privilege.

It is wonderful to know that we are holy in this relational sense. We as the people of God in this age are shoots on the olive tree of new covenant Israel and are not shoots on the wild olive tree of paganism. We are a part of that assembly which gathers on the Lord's Day to worship the living and true God, that assembly to which Jesus gave the promise that He would be there in their midst when gathered together in His name. We are there exposed to the means of grace, especially the Word which is able from infancy to make one wise unto salvation. There the faithful pray for us and our salvation. There we are exposed to examples of genuine faith and sheltered from the evil company which corrupts good habits. We are grateful indeed for all these blessings and benefits, and we recognize their significance.

We have looked at holiness as peerless divinity and as privileged relationship. Our last point is holiness as moral purity. As I have already said, God is holy in this sense as well. Adam was holy in this sense before his fall into sin. And we become holy in this sense as a part of our salvation. When we come to Jesus in faith and depend upon Him alone to make us right with God, Jesus both forgives us and delivers us. When we come to Jesus in faith, He gives us a new legal record before God and He gives us a new heart. Through the new legal record, we immediately have a legal standing of perfect righteousness before God. Based on our faith relationship with Jesus, God regards Jesus' suffering upon the cross as the payment for our sins and He erases our guilt. Based on our faith relationship with Jesus, God reckons Jesus' perfect legal record of a life lived in perfect obedience to God as our legal record. Also, when we come to Jesus in faith, God begins giving us a new heart. He starts by delivering us from the dominating power of sin. He replaces our domineering inclination to rebel against God and God's law by putting within us a prevailing desire to please God and a prevailing inclination to submit to God's law. Indwelling sin still clings to all that we do, and at times we go astray, but sin never lords it over us again in a comprehensive and continuous sense. And when this life is over, God will complete this moral transformation, and we will be made perfect in holiness. We will be freed even from the inner presence of a sin inclination. That is point when the Bride of Christ is completely cleansed and has no moral spot or wrinkle and is a glorious church.

Beloved, I leave you with three thoughts about holiness. First, allow God to be God, and don't covet His special prerogatives. Only He can define right and wrong, and we need to submit to

His definitions of moral purity. There is a sense in which only God is holy, and we must be at peace with that.

Second, take full advantage of the privileges of being a part of God's holy people. Take full advantage of the means of grace, which are the Word, the sacraments and prayer. Worship God regularly with God's people, and pray for God to work within your heart.

Third, come to Jesus in faith. Then you will be holy not only in an outward sense as a part of God's holy nation, but in an inward sense. Then you will have that inner holiness, that heart purity without which, as the writer of Hebrews tells us, no one will see God. Heart holiness is not something we do to be saved. Jesus does all the saving work through His life of perfect obedience and His suffering as a finished sacrifice. We are saved through faith in Jesus and not through any work that we do. Yet a consequence of that faith relationship with Jesus is a new heart holiness which manifests itself in a new holiness in our conduct. A holy life is a result of our saving relationship with Jesus. Through our faith relationship with Jesus, we can obey God's command to be holy even as He is holy.