

God Is Holy

Sears Roebuck and Company is world famous and has been an economic powerhouse in the sale of hard goods like Craftsman tools, Kenmore appliances and Allstate automobile products. However in recent years Sears has wanted to change its public image and remind people that they also sell shoes, shirts, dresses and linens. So the new advertising line has been to “come see the softer side of Sears.” The idea is not that they will stop selling hard goods like appliances, tools and automobile products but to remind the public of the whole orb of what Sears retail business is.

Our generation has overwhelmingly emphasized the “softer side” of God. We are very familiar with talking about God in terms of God’s love, God’s mercy, God’s patience, God’s kindness — all things that are the softer side of God. But at the same time we’ve neglected what might be called the harder side of God. Actually that’s probably not good terminology because it makes it sound as if God may be inappropriately harsh or maybe even horrible. What we really should say is that we have tended to neglect the holy side of God.

If we get down to the very basics of what everybody should know about God, one of the things that must be included on that list is that God is holy. The word “holy” is found 584 times in the English Bible. That tells us that holiness is important in the Bible although perhaps not well understood. My guess is if we took a quick quiz that a lot of us would have some difficulty defining exactly what it means to be holy. Holy in its root meaning means to be separate or distinct. The idea is that God is separate from everybody else. He’s distinct. He’s one of a kind. However, the difference primarily relates to evil. God is completely distant from anything and everything that is evil.

The Old Testament prophet Habakkuk gives us a graphic description of God in his little book in the Old Testament. “O Lord. . . your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.” (Habakkuk 1:12-13)

You see, we don’t really understand God until we understand how different and distinct he is from anything that is evil or bad or sinful. God can’t even

look at it. He can’t tolerate that which is wrong. We could say that God is allergic to evil. He’s allergic to sin. He’s got to stay away from it because it provokes such a strong reaction in him.

Now I have never suffered from the common allergies but I’ve observed many who are allergic to pollen, chemicals or animal dander. It’s a big deal! It can impact all of your life and make you really sick. The closest that I have by comparison is my reaction to poison ivy which I’ve been told by some medical people is more of a sensitivity and really not an allergy in the traditional sense. Call it what you want, let me tell you I hate the stuff!

When I was in the seventh grade I remember being covered with it. I missed three weeks of school and I would have rather been in school than have poison ivy. I had it on the bottom of my feet, on my hands, in my mouth, my eyes were swollen almost closed — it was really a terrible experience! One arm was so swollen that for almost two weeks I was unable to bend it.

But you know, I learned a lesson. I learned that I need to stay away from the stuff. I avoid poison ivy at great lengths. If I see it I go in the opposite direction. If I mow grass and see any poison ivy, after I’m finished I take a shower to make sure that I get those oils off of me. I would be glad if poison ivy were obliterated from the face of the earth! I

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know of no socially redeeming value to poison ivy! So when it comes to poison ivy, I’m “holy” — that is, I’m separate

from it. I want nothing to do with it.

But God has a far greater aversion to sin than I do to poison ivy or that you do to anything that makes you sick. God hates sin. He doesn’t even like to look at it. He doesn’t want to have anything to do with it. It would be fine with God if sin were obliterated off the face of the earth and out of the universe. There is no redeeming value to sin. So God is separate. God is holy.

However, we are misunderstanding the holiness of God if we see it only in terms of what God is against. We need to understand that holiness is much more than God being separate; it has to do with God being superior. And that’s kind of a hard concept

for us to grasp. This is a different kind of superiority than God's power or knowledge. When we say that God is all-powerful we are saying that he has supernatural power that is greater than all of the might of the military of all of the nations of the world. His power is greater than all of the nuclear weapons that could ever be exploded. When we talk about God's knowledge we mean that he knows more than everyone in the world knows or every computer knows. God's knowledge infinitely exceeds all the information that we have.

The holiness of God means that God is morally and ethically superior to the very best of us. God is the purest of the pure. Look at Isaiah 6:1-5. It's a report of the experience that the Old Testament prophet Isaiah had when he received a glimpse of heaven.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."

Did you notice that the celestial seraphs were just dazzled — awestruck — by God? What they talked about was not how much he knew or how powerful he was. They were struck by his holiness. Those who encounter the holiness of God are shocked by his purity and his superiority. The holiness of God is dazzling.

The trouble is it's hard for us to come up with comparisons to make to our own experience. We have ways of describing the people around us like: "the lady with long hair," "the well-dressed man," "the guy who talks too much," or "the old rich guy." Every once in a while we describe a person not by how he looks or her socioeconomic status but as "that righteous person" — someone who is known not by good looks or money or job but simply by

character.

For the angels of heaven the dazzling thing about God is his character. More than anything else, God has impeccable integrity. He is holy. He is morally and ethically perfect. In fact, there are some people who say that holiness is the number one characteristic of God.

If you could make a list of every characteristic to describe God and rank them in order of importance, the first would have to be God's holiness. Holiness is more about what God is than all of his power and all of his knowledge.

The bottom line of all of this is that God is unique. He is one of a kind. In 1500 B. C., or thereabouts, Moses who was the head of the nation of Israel wrote some lyric poetry — he actually sang it. It's in Exodus chapter 15. Moses wrote, "Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you — majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?" The answer obviously is no one

is like God. No one is holy as he is. No one is as majestic. He is unique.

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We've

done an interesting thing in everyday English. We've taken the word unique and we've watered it down to mean something that really is not akin to the true definition of the word. We've tended to use the word unique more to say that something's unusual or that it's special. In fact, we frequently put adjectives in front of it so we say, "It was a really unique experience." Or, "She is a totally unique person." Or, "What happened was very unique." Well those who are really good at their English grammar and language will tell you that you really can't do that. You can never put a modifier with "unique," because "unique" means that it is the only one in it's category. There are no others. There is nothing to compare to. Something can't be very unique. If it's unique, it's the only one. It can't be "really unique;" it can't be "totally unique;" I mean that's what unique means.

That's who God is. He is unique. He is one of a kind. No one else is like him. His uniqueness is primarily in his holiness. He is so good. So perfect. So right. So opposite of evil. So contrary to sin. God is holy. But we're not. We're sinners. All of us.

The Bible has a very pointed line in the New

Testament in Romans 3:23 that says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Or another way of saying it is, if we compare each of us to the holiness of God, everyone of us comes up short by comparison. Nobody measures up to God.

When you were a kid did you ever stand on the shore of a lake and throw stones to see who could toss them the farthest out into the water? Let’s imagine that all of us line up for a contest like this. We’ll imagine we’re on the North Shore of Lake Superior. Everybody gets to pick six stones and we all take our turns. And by the way, the objective is to hit Saulte Ste. Marie in Ontario which is about 400 miles directly across Lake Superior.

The first person comes up and really winds up and lets go. The stone makes it about 22 feet out into the water. Bad news. The next person makes it out a hundred yards. Everybody says, “Wow! That’s really good.” But then you remember the target is 400 miles away on the other side of Lake Superior.

That’s the way it is comparing us to God. If the rock toss were a morality contest, a mass murderer could probably only throw his stone about 6 inches while Mother Theresa might heave her rock an impressive 400 feet. That’s great until you realize that the target is in Ontario. It is the other side of the lake. She falls short. We all fall short of this holiness of God. What is really crazy is the way we can sit around and talk about how good a toss we made. “I got 117 feet.” “Wow, you’re good!” But that’s not good! It’s not good when the target is the other side of the lake. The point is not how far we made it, but how far we missed. The standard for holiness is God and our best shot isn’t good enough. It’s totally inadequate.

When we realize the holiness of God we echo the words of Isaiah, “Woe to me. I’m ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” I’ve seen the goal. I know how high it is. I know how spectacular and holy is the Lord God Almighty.

We’re sinful. And remember, holy means separate. If God is holy and if we are not, if God is allergic to sin and sinners and we are sinful that means that we’re separated from God and that gets very serious. That means that while we want God to be

our friend, the truth is he’s allergic to us and we’ve become his enemy. It means that when we want to be close, God has to keep a distance. It means that while we want to live forever in his heaven that he just can’t have us there. He can’t have us in heaven if we’re sinners because he can’t stand to be around sin. And then we begin to see that our lives become lousy and our eternity is destined to be an eternity without God.

When we understand our situation we begin to despair. We start to whimper and say, “Is there no hope? Does this mean that we are forever stuck — that we can never get close to God?” That’s where the good news comes in. When we are at our lowest point there comes this bright shining light and a clear voice speaks the gospel. Gospel means good news. It is the good news of Jesus Christ — the good news that we do not have to be alienated from a holy God. We can be holy as well!

Think of it as if we are in a courtroom in the district of heaven. God is the judge on the bench and we are the defendants. We are sinful. We say with Isaiah, “Woe is me. I don’t have a chance here. I’m doomed.” And then up steps the Son of God, Jesus Christ himself. He offers a deal. The deal is that he will come to earth, die on the cross, pay the price for sin and there will be an exchange. The exchange is that our sin will be transferred to him and his holiness will be transferred to us. God says, “Okay. Let’s do it.” So Jesus came and died and Jesus rose again from the dead and completed his side of the offer.

Then God says to us, “Here’s the deal. All you have to do is step up to the railing and accept the deal.” Some do and some don’t. Those who do — you’ve heard the expression about accepting Jesus Christ as Savior. It’s accepting the deal. It’s called “becoming a Christian” or the Bible talks about being “born again.” It’s this transfer of the holiness of Jesus Christ to us. It is when we agree to become saints.

Do you know what “saint” means? It means “holy one.” So anyone who agrees to this deal that is offered becomes a saint. If you have agreed to the deal you can put “saint” on your business card or stationery! When a person becomes a Christian

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that person is legally re-classified from sinner to saint in the records of heaven. It is an instant and permanent transaction.

However, it can take a lifetime for the practical change of holiness to take place. The practical change is that we become like God. Not like God in that we have infinite power. Not like God in that we have infinite knowledge. But like God in that we are completely separate from sin.

Think of it this way. Suppose that you're broke (that may not be hard for you to imagine) and that you are really deeply in debt. I mean serious debt — a million dollars in debt. You know that in your lifetime you would not have a chance of ever catching up. Then someone gives you a billion dollars which will be transferred to a trust account in your name. It's in an irrevocable trust so it will never be taken back. It's yours. Technically at the moment that the wire transfer takes place you are a billionaire but you don't quite have it yet. You still owe a million dollars.

What you need to do, of course, is start making withdrawals from the trust. You start paying off the money that you owe and you start living like the rich person you have become.

That's sort of what happens when we become Christians who follow Jesus Christ. We are legally holy but it takes time to withdraw from our account of the holiness of God, to stop sinning and to start acting like the holy persons that God has declared us to be.

There's a powerful line in the New Testament in I Peter 1:15-16. "Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'" God is saying that we are to be holy the way he is.

Let's go back to the poison ivy for a minute. As I've gotten older, because of my terrible experiences with poison ivy, I avoid it. If I see a clump of poison ivy I go in the opposite direction. If I am near a fire where I think that they're burning weeds that might have poison ivy in them I'm going to get as far away from the smoke as I can. I intentionally avoid anything to do with poison ivy.

Those who are holy increasingly do the same thing with sin. We've been burned by it. We've had the blisters and the problems. We know the consequences and whenever we see it we want to step back and avoid it and be separate from it. That's what it means to be holy as God is holy.

If we only know a few things about God this is one of the things that we must know — that God is holy. And the more we see his holiness the more in awe of him we become. The more we see his holiness the more we are aware of our sinfulness. And the more we grab the opportunity to leave the sin behind and to be holy like God. I think this is so important that I want us to take a couple of extra minutes and give opportunity for each of us to talk to God about how this relates to us. Let me suggest some topics and words for different prayers.

If you are not a Christian, or you are unsure, tell God something like this. "God, I acknowledge that you are holy and that I am a sinner. Please forgive my sin through my faith in Jesus Christ. Please make me holy like you."

If you know that you are already a Christian, pray something like this. "Lord God, I am awed by your holiness. I want to hate the sin in my life. I want to be holy like you. Please, God, help me to be holy like you."

God, we stand in awe of you. You are unique. You are pure. You are holy. Forgive our sin. Receive our worship and make us holy through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

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