



## Holiness and sanctification

'Holy' is a word that suits God foremost and is subsequently applied to humans and things. Therefore, when exploring this word, we should first look at the meaning as God uses it to describe himself.

To begin with, God's holiness indicates that he is completely without sin. He is pure through and through, in the essence of his Being.

His holiness is almost always mentioned in combination with his majesty: *Who among the gods is like you, Lord? Who is like you — majestic in holiness...?* (Exodus 15:11; see also Leviticus 10:3; Psalm 77:14; Isaiah 40:25; Luke 1:49). Those two elements strengthen each other.

It is often different where heathen gods are concerned: there the power is connected to negative characteristics. They look after their own interests, with a perverted exercise of power if need be. As opposed to this, God in his self-revelation often places the emphasis on his power in combination with his holiness. It is incompatible with his Being that impure ulterior motives could play a part. For example, when he demands that he be honored as the one and only, that is not a perverted enjoyment of power, but it is truly of benefit to the world.

God's holiness is also connected to his omniscience. For his perfect goodness does not mean that he does not know how evil works. He fathoms the depths of sin without becoming involved in it. He is far above all that. He places a tree of knowledge of good and evil in paradise, at the same time making it perfectly clear on all fronts that he does *not* want man to choose evil.

For the angels close to God his holiness is an ongoing well of joy and deep reverence, of which they do not tire of singing (Isaiah 6:1-3; Revelations 4:8). The reverent praise befits God's holiness. When God 'makes holy' the seventh day by resting on it (Genesis 2:3), what this means to the recently created people is that they may on this day praise and testify to the great goodness of his works (Psalm 92).

### Imperfection

After sin's entrance at the Fall this changes: then the confrontation with God's holiness means a fearful and crushing realization of one's own imperfection (Joshua 24:19; Isaiah 6:5). Then God's holiness also underlines the great distance that has come between God and man through sin. Holiness becomes something to fear:

*The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread.*

(Isaiah 8:13)

It is therefore to be expected that since the Fall nothing on earth can be called 'holy' anymore. Yet, wondrously enough, that is not true. God opens a way of atonement of the guilt, and through the strength of his Holy(!) Spirit he is again working at the sanctification of his creation.

In the Old Testament many things are called 'holy' or 'consecrated', for example: the tabernacle (Exodus 26:33) and the temple (Isaiah 64:11), the things inside the tabernacle (Exodus 40:9) and the offerings dedicated to the Lord (Leviticus 27:14; 2 Samuel 8:11; 1 Chronicles 26:27; Ezra 8:28). But also the city of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 11:1; Psalm 46:4), the places where the ark had been (2

Chronicles 8:11), the cities of refuge (Joshua 20:7) and even the ground under your feet when God appears (Exodus 3:5; Joshua 5:15) were all holy.

People, too, can be 'holy': Israel's firstborn (Exodus 13:2), the whole people of Israel (Exodus 19:6; Deuteronomy 7:6, Ezra 9:1), priests and Levites (Exodus 29:1; 2 Chronicles 29:34), Israel's soldiers setting out to battle (1 Sam. 21:6), the Nazirite (Numbers 6:5) and especially the prophets (2 Kings 4:9; Jeremiah 1:5).

### **Claimed by the Lord**

In all these examples, 'holy' does not have the meaning of 'without sin', but of being claimed by the Lord or dedicated to him by free will. God himself pulls things or people into his sphere of holiness. In doing that he creates a distance between the 'holy' and the 'ordinary' things and people. What has been consecrated should be approached with reverence and awe. Not because there is anything mysterious about it, or because it has a magical power connected to it, but because God has set his claim upon it.

So when people are called holy, that says nothing about their progress in fighting against sin. On the other hand, if you are sanctified by God, that does demand a fitting lifestyle. Whoever has been pulled into the pure sphere of God must also let himself be sanctified even into the farthest corners of his heart. Therefore God warns in Leviticus, the book of Law: *Be holy because I am holy!* (Leviticus 11:44; 20:7; 22:31-32). It is not for nothing that the first prayer Christ teaches us is: *hallowed be your name* (Matthew 6:9).

Christ is called '*the holy one of God*'. That points to his being completely without sin, and to his dedication to his special commission (Mark 1:24; John 6:69; 10:36; 17:19). Through his own holiness he is able to make holy those who belong with him (Hebrews 2:11; 10:10, 14, 29; 13:12).

In the New Testament, remarkably, the believers are often referred to as '*the saints*'. That already begins in Daniel's visions, see 7:18, 21, 25, 27; 8:13, 24; 12:7. But the young Christian congregations also appear to use the term in their daily lives: Acts 9:13,32; Romans 8:27; 12:13; 15:25; 16:2; 1 Corinthians 6:2; 16:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Ephesians 1:1,18; 2:19, and in other passages. Once again, here it cannot bear the meaning of 'without sin' but must mean 'dedicated to God'. First and foremost, this dedication comes from God: he claims their lives. He fills them with his Holy Spirit, so that a purifying force pervades their lives. Subsequently it also flows out from the believer: they start dedicating themselves to God and purifying their lives.

### **Many times**

The call to holiness can be heard many times in the epistles. Not as a condition to be able to belong to God, but because we already belong with him:

*It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.*

(1 Corinthians 1:30; see also 6:11; Ephesians 1:4; Hebrews 10:10, 14)

Our new self has already been laid out for us to put on, *created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness* (Ephesians 4:24). Moreover, not only are believers sanctified, but their children too, and even their unbelieving husband or wife is pulled into the sphere of holiness (1 Corinthians 7:14).

With that high position also comes a higher calling. We are *called to be his holy people* (Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2), we must offer our *bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God* (Romans 12:1), it is God's will that we *should be sanctified*, that we *should avoid sexual immorality*, that each of us *should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable* (1 Thessalonians 4:3-4).

Also in the New Testament, the basis for a holy life is a deep awe for God's holiness and majesty. Here, too, the warning sounds: *Be holy, because I am holy!* (1 Peter 1:14-16).

At the same time it is true that, thanks to Christ, God's holiness does not keep us at a distance. That makes us stand even more in awe.

After Paul has pointed out in 2 Corinthians 6 that God has come to dwell among us and that we are his sons and daughters, he continues in 7:1:

*Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.*

Along the same lines the author of the letter to the Hebrews shows us in 12:18-29 how God's majestic holiness held the people at a shuddering distance under the Old Covenant, while now, in Christ, we may come so close. Not that respect is no longer a requisition:

*"Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for 'our God is a consuming fire.'"*

(Hebrews 12:28-29)

## **Obedience**

This reverence colors and permeates the obedience. Life sanctification is accompanied by an increasing realization of one's smallness and dependence, especially because a Christian realizes that he receives his holiness from the Holy One himself. To his own wonder and joy, he notices that he wants more and more to look like the Holy One. He learns to long for purity and perfection. Sanctification puts a claim on all thoughts and feelings, and, from within these, changes our whole behavior, so that we are prepared to make ourselves available without keeping anything behind. It is because this sanctification starts so deeply in us, that it is, in principle, total.

Yet even a 'saint' can stumble. But time and again the Spirit pulls our attention towards God, so that the respect for him brings tears of repentance and renewed dedication. Paul's prayer thus characterizes the longing of a believer:

*May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

(1 Thessalonians 5:23)

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### **Note:**

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations and references are taken from the New International Version of the Bible (NIV), 2010.