

# The Holiness of God

by Olin Alfred Curtis

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*The sermon explores the concept of God's holiness and its relationship to his love and moral concern.*

**Scripture:** Exodus 34:5, John 3:16, Romans 1:18, Romans 5:8, Ephesians 4:30, 1 John 4:8

**Topics:** "Divine Holiness", "Gods Sovereignty"

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## Description

Olin Alfred Curtis delves into the profound concept of the holiness of God as the root of the redemptive work of our Lord, emphasizing the Old Testament's focus on God's moral sovereignty and lovingkindness. He contrasts the emphasis on moral sovereignty in the Old Testament with the sovereign Fatherhood in the New Testament, highlighting the shift from enthroned righteousness to personal love. Curtis explores the harmonization of God's moral concern and love for humanity through the lens of divine holiness, explaining how God's wrath is a manifestation of his love restrained by unrighteousness, ultimately rooted in his absolute moral perfection.

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## Transcript

Crucifixus est Dei Filius;

non pudet, quia pudendum est;

et mortuus est Dei Filius;

prorsus credibile est,

quia ineptum est,

et sepultus, resurrexit:

certum est, quia impossibile.

-- Tertullian, De Carne Christi, v. --

In discussing the Christian religion as related to the moral person we glimpsed the subject of the divine holiness; but that glimpse is not enough for our coming discussion. Before trying to apprehend the supreme Christian doctrine of our Lord's redemptive work we need clearly to understand the root of that work; and the root of that work is surely the holiness of God. First, let us turn to the Old Testament.

The Moral Sovereignty of God. The most striking characteristic of the Old Testament is its perpetual consciousness of the fact of God. At every crisis, and even in every smaller turn of history, the scene is filled with God. You hear human voices and see human forms, it is true, but they merely emphasize the dominating presence of the Lord God of Israel. "God was the only force in the world." But when we would get behind this fact of God, when we would learn the exact conception of God held in the Old Testament, our task is not so quickly performed as one might at first suppose. There are very dim places where hardly two Old Testament scholars can agree as to the final meaning; and, what is more confusing still, there sometimes seems to be a shifting from one meaning to another. All this granted, however, yet there is a line of certainty. If we are willing to avoid the insignificant utterances and the sporadic moods, if we are anxious to catch only the general trend in teaching, there will sooner or later appear one mighty intention to urge upon men the moral sovereignty of God. In the Old Testament, God is, primarily, the Divine Ruler, who ever rules with the most strenuous moral regard. He does not, he will not, he cannot palliate sin.

This statement, though, should not be made without making another, a subordinate statement. The divine moral regard taught in the Old Testament, although inflexible, is never heartless. Again and again the ethical strenuousness is relieved somewhat by a note of lovingkindness. There are a number of passages which are to the point; but I wish you specially to note that "very surprising ancient passage" in the book of Exodus (34.5-7) where Jehovah descends in the cloud, and passes by before Moses, and proclaims himself as "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in lovingkindness." But even in making this subordinate statement we must preserve the ethical environment. About every gracious utterance in the Old Testament there is an atmosphere charged with moral lightning; and sometimes there is more than the atmosphere, there is the actual flash. Indeed, the actual flash appears in the instance just cited, for the passage, you will remember, closes thus: "and that will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, upon the third and upon the fourth generation." It has been said that such visitation is injustice, and so cannot be moral, cannot reveal the moral sovereignty of Jehovah. I admit without hesitation that such visitation is downright injustice; and were it in no corrective connection, were there no supplemental revelation, it would be clearly immoral. But in a crude situation, where free and sinful persons are being gradually trained toward a moral goal, injustice itself can be so related to that goal as to become urgent for it, and thus become moral, not in essence, but in effect. Practically considered, anything is moral which in its sum total of influence tends to make men hate sin and love righteousness.

What I hold, then, is this: The cumulating sweep of Old Testament teaching is insistent upon, not the majesty, not the supremacy of God, but his moral majesty, his moral supremacy. And, further, that the expressions of divine tenderness do not weaken this moral insistence. And, further, that the so-called "immoralities of the Old Testament" are not like the same cruelties and strokes of injustice left ambiguous, or uncorrected, in the natural world; but are so peculiarly connected, and so plainly supplemented, as ultimately to exalt the moral sovereignty of God.

The Fatherhood of God. It is not worth the cost to take sides on the question whether or not the doctrine of the Fatherhood of God is taught in the Old Testament. Even if it is taught there the teaching is out of the main current, and results in a very different degree of emphasis from that which we find in the New Testament. As Professor Sanday has said, "And yet the doctrine of the New Testament assumes such different proportions is almost to amount to a new revelation." Nor is it worth our time to try to analyze the New Testament doctrine of the divine Fatherhood to bring out exactly all the elements in their perfect combination. Indeed, after reading all the important special works on the subject I am far from certain that

such an analysis can be made. The one thing essential to us in this discussion, however, stands out very clearly in the New Testament. That one essential thing is this: God loves men as a perfect '1 father loves his children. The last word of revelation is not that God is a moral sovereign, but that he is a sovereign Father. Mr. Lidgett's phrase is an exceedingly happy one -- God is "the Father Regnant."

There is no fundamental contradiction between the conception of the moral sovereignty in the Old Testament and the conception of sovereign Fatherhood in the New Testament, but there is an extremely important difference in practical emphasis. In the one case, the emphasis is upon enthroned righteousness; in the other case, the emphasis is upon personal love. The righteousness has in it loving-kindness, and the love is thoroughly moral, and yet the change in emphasis creates another world. It is something like the difference between a bright day in January and a bright day in June. Both days have the shining sun; but in January plants freeze even in the sunshine, while in June they grow and burst into bloom. The Old Testament is essentially a world of moral sovereignty, and it is frigid. The New Testament is essentially a world of moral love, and it is creative.

Why is the emphasis in the New Testament upon God's love? There are two reasons which readily come to mind: 1. There is a reason in what may be called the method in the divine pedagogy. Man being what he is, a person, and as he is, a sinner, the first thing necessary to be done for him is to place the most tremendous stress upon the moral fact; but this tremendous stress is sure to generate despair in the sinful moral person. He has the ability to exercise faith, I admit; but the faith exercised under such circumstances cannot complete the man's religious life. Therefore, this extreme stress upon the moral fact is first modified by the Messianic expectation, and then transformed into dynamic gladness by the full revelation of the moral love of God in the gospel of the Son of God as actual Redeemer. 2. The second reason is profounder. The inspired authors of the New Testament are ever writing from the standpoint of the redemptional consciousness. And God's primary motive in redemption is love. In other words, God does not make an awful self-sacrifice to save men because he is a moral ruler, and as a moral ruler is seeking to obtain subjects for his kingdom. The point of view is not what God needs rectorally, but what men can experience. Both in creation and in salvation God is profoundly thinking of men. He wants them to have the possibility of moral character, moral service, and moral fellowship; and then to have the glorious experience in everlasting joy. True it is, and we need to repeat it again and again, that God's total interest in men is a moral interest. He does not care for a man whether or no. But this divine moral interest is a vast beneficence, and is not merely an ambition to get a new colony of citizens.

The Holiness of God. Our discussion thus far has been of some worth, and yet it has been all on the surface. When we ask what is meant by moral love, the expression which we have used so freely, we come upon a large problem in harmony, namely, the fundamental harmonization of God's personal love for men with his infinite moral concern. It is easy enough to join the two things in a phrase, but such verbal work does not show the principle of harmony. And, as a matter of fact, this principle of harmony has not been seriously sought by the conventional theologian.

The solution of our problem in harmony lies, I am convinced, in fully grasping the ultimate, basal meaning of the divine holiness. First of all, though, let us turn to the Word of God. The primary significance of the term holiness as used in the Old Testament we cannot determine beyond a doubt. Several times, in the last fifteen years, I have been obliged to change my tentative opinion, until now I am more and more inclined to think that the word, in its earliest usage, had no distinctly ethical content. Probably it was merely a vaguely reverent indication of the bare idea of Deity, and probably the only definite thought always in the mind was this: God is unapproachable. Just as in going into the presence of royalty upon the

throne, men would not rush at their king, but would drop to the earth, or by some peculiar gesture manifest their reverence, so in a higher degree they regarded their God as not easily to be approached; and the term holiness was (not "an otiose epithet") the rhetorical index of their reverent hesitation before God. But in the clearest personal moods there must have been in the mind some reason for the divine unapproachableness; and this reason would naturally correspond with the conception of God which was held at the time. Gradually, then, the holiness of God would itself come to mean as much as the actual conception of God could furnish of content. Then, as under the great ethical prophets, the whole view concerning Jehovah was charged with moral quality and with moral intensity, the holiness of God would, at last, mean nothing less than his absolute moral perfection. But, whether we accept this theory or another, we can safely affirm that there are lofty places in the Old Testament where the statement that God is holy certainly means that he is absolutely and inflexibly righteous.

The term holiness, as used in the New Testament (\*hagios, hagiotes, hagnosyne\*) is one of those words taken over into Christian thinking and filled with a new spirit. Admittedly the word has a point of connection in the old Greek usage, but in the New Testament it gains ethical tone and fullness. Professor Stevens says: "The Christian use of the word lifted it into accord with the highest ethical conceptions, and gave it the idea of separateness from the sinful world, harmony with God, the absolutely Good Being, moral perfection. Thus \*hagios\* is, above all things, a qualitative and ethical term." The prophets of the Old Testament were, I believe, the teachers who made possible this final moral establishment of the idea of holiness. In the Christian view the holy man is the man whose entire being is organized under moral concern. But when the term is applied to God the full Christian meaning is, I think, something more. It is that God is both absolutely perfect and absolutely moral. In God there is no blemish of any kind whatsoever; but this divine perfection is urged with the most intense ethical emphasis. God is perfect and he is righteous. The Christian conception starts with God's perfection and culminates in his moral life. It is not that God is perfect because he is moral, but rather that he is moral because he is perfect. Thus God's moral life obtains its awful unyieldingness, for it is rooted in the wholeness of the Infinite Being. This point I must insist upon, for it has, when we come to the doctrine of the atonement, the most vital importance. The final Christian idea is that God must be ethically satisfied, not because he bechances to have a moral standard, but because he has a moral standard and -- AND this moral standard is the necessary expression of his absolute perfection.

This is the Christian view, as I understand it; can we give to it any clarity by philosophical consideration? I think we can in the following manner: The fundamental individuality of God himself is under law, in the sense that it is a complex of initial qualities made organic under an eternal plan of harmony. An attribute, say that of justice, cannot exist in God in isolated pulsation, but must enter into modifying relations. Justice must come to terms with all God is. Perhaps you will understand me better if we think for a moment of the most noble kind of a man. In fact, it was by studying such a man that I first found the clue to the point. This most noble kind of a man is never just, never absolutely just, for his sense of justice is always chastened by other noble qualities which he possesses. In truth, no Christian man could be merely just for even one day and not cease to be a Christian. No one thing in large manhood gets its own way entirely. I will not say that lofty character is a compromise, for the word compromise has taken on a flavor of weakness, if not of positive unrighteousness; but I will say that every lofty character is a modification of many qualities into harmonious reciprocity. Much more, then, it seems to me, is the individuality of God an organic whole where many items of attribute are modified and adjusted unto complete harmony. This underlying plan of adjustment, determining precisely to what extent, and precisely in what connection, an attribute is to have force, is what I understand by the law of God's holiness. Therefore, the law of holiness, or holiness in the

divine nature, is the finality, the fundament of all God's being. Holding fast to this view of basal holiness in God, we have a clear entrance into the significance of his moral concern. God is a personal Being and so is both self-conscious and self-decisive. The law of holiness appears in self-consciousness, and the result is moral distinction with moral obligation. (This will be considered under moral law.) Toward this moral distinction and obligation God bears in self-decision. This self-decisive attitude toward the eternal distinction between right and wrong is the divine moral concern. In intrinsic personal meaning this moral concern in God exactly corresponds to a man's loyalty to righteousness. But in application to God the word loyalty is unsuitable, for personal loyalty implies the pressure of antagonistic motives, and the absolute God has no antagonism in motive. And yet the divine adoption of the law of holiness is not mechanical, but a genuine personalization of that law. Quickly you will catch my meaning if you think of the life of a saint in the final glory. He is established, perfectly fixed in moral character, and so he has only one soft of motive urgent toward volition; but nevertheless his decision is not an automatic spring at a mark -- it is a self-decision made in the full vision of self-consciousness.

We are now prepared to deal directly with our problem in harmony. Our question is this: How can we harmonize the moral concern of God with his love for men? Or we can state the question in another way: How can God have toward man a unitary bearing which has in it both personal love and moral concern? First of all, I must entirely reject the pantheistic view that the love of God has primary relation to man; that man, or at least some moral person, must be created to furnish an object for the divine interest as an inherent and original yearning. This view has crept into the very life of modern thinking, and the result is a sentimentalism which is most unwholesome. God had no intrinsic need of men, or of any created objects for his love. The love of God is eternally complete, eternally infinite as an actual experience in the triune Godhead, an experience belonging to the ineffable fellowship of the divine Persons.

Next, let us notice the wonderful relation which this eternal love of God sustains to the law of holiness. Love is the dynamic of the law of holiness. It is by means of this very love that the organization of the Godhead is effected. The law of holiness becomes personal in moral concern, but it becomes dynamic in personal love. Thus, love is the holiness of God absolutely actualized in personal experience. And thus, the eternal love of God is the most intensely moral feature in the whole life of the Godhead.

Coming now to God's love for man, what is it? exactly how much does it mean? It is infinite moral beneficence, neither more nor less. The love of God for man (whether we have in mind God the Father, or all the divine Persons in one individual organism) is but a moral longing to have all men achieve the everlasting experience in personality of moral concern made dynamic in the rejoicing fellowship of moral love. In other words, God's interest in men is an unselfish reflex of the divine manner of life. God wants men to have, in their finite capacity, the same kind of moral organism, the same kind of moral joy in fellowship, that the Persons of the Godhead have in their infinite capacity. Thus, our problem in harmony is solved by regarding the love of God for men as nothing other than an altruistic manifestation of his moral concern itself.

The Wrath of God. Already we have considered God's hatred of sin as expressed in depravity, in the natural world, in the broken brotherhood of man, and in the abnormal event of human death; but, if we are true to the whole message of the gospel, we must go further, and teach that this divine hatred of sin is also manifested in a bearing of wrath toward sinful men. Often in our preaching we say, "God hates sin, but he loves the sinner. The utterance is profoundly Christian in spirit, but it should never be taken to mean that the immediate divine attitude is complacent toward a man now in sin; as if the man himself could be actually separated from his action and motive. The plain Christian fact is that the immediate attitude of

God toward any and every sinner is one of anger. While God will do all possible things to rescue a man from sin, he bears toward the man in positive wrath every moment of his sinful life, provided that the sin is personal sin involving moral responsibility.

Sometimes this wrath of God is regarded as so purely and so intensely personal that it amounts to hardly more than a self-determined, infinite, personal grievance against the sinner. And, again, the wrath is regarded as so impersonal, so much a consequence of law, that it amounts to hardly more than automatic fury. Bishop Martensen, in his Dogmatics, gives us an illuminating word when he says: The wrath of God is "a revelation of love restrained, hindered, and stayed through unrighteousness." His meaning is that God's love is like a torrent in mighty rush, and when you try to dam the rushing stream it beats in violence against the obstacle. But Martensen's conception requires a most careful treatment, or it, too, will drop all ethical quality in a mechanical movement. In some way the wrath of God must be first lifted out of all possibility of caprice and then filled with personal decision. It must be made a thing of both law and personality. As a protective enlargement of Bishop Martensen's conception, I will state my own entire view of the wrath of God:

1. The fundament of the matter is the law of the holiness of God.
2. In every situation the primary demand is that this law of holiness shall be expressed.
3. The objective expression of this law of holiness is always by the personal decision of God, and therefore the expression is a thing of both law and personality.
4. In a normal situation, where there is a response in the yielding of the moral person, the law of holiness is fully expressed by the unitary bearing of God in simple moral love. That is, God's entire interest comes out in one throb of infinite longing for the moral completion of the man's life.
5. In an abnormal situation, where on the part of the moral person there is actual resistance instead of a yielding response, the law of holiness can be expressed only by a twofold bearing, in which two things are emphasized, namely, a desire to rescue the sinner, and an inflexible regard for the law of holiness. It is a case where the freedom of man throws God's bearing out of normal tendency and makes necessary a separate emphasis upon moral concern.
6. In a situation which is not only abnormal, but also irrevocably so, the law of holiness can be expressed only by moral concern alone. In this hopeless situation God's only interest is in holiness. I well know how out of range it is with the temper of the Zeitgeist, but we should firmly say this: The holy God does not, and cannot, love a moral person who has in his freedom forever settled it that he will have no moral life. Such a man must be everlastingly under the full wrath of God. Moral love is not now beating against an obstacle, it has been finally rejected and flung back into the primary insistence upon the law of holiness.

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