

Evangelism Training, Part 2

Truth 1: God is the holy Creator and Judge.

I. Introduction

Every gospel presentation must begin with the character of God. It is, after all, a message from God that is designed to put His glorious perfections on display to all of creation. This is why the Christian message is often referred to as “the gospel of God” (Mark 1:14; Rom 1:1; 2 Cor 11:7; 1 Thess 2:2; 1 Thess 2:8; 1 Pet 4:17). The evangelist is therefore first and foremost a proclaimer of God. He represents God, explains God, extols God, and urges sinners to seek God. His urgent message is grounded in the being and character of God. Without this foundation, the good news of Jesus Christ is nonsensical.

Imagine if someone were to say to you, “I have good news. We have finally made peace!” You would likely respond, “What? Peace with who? What conflict are you referring to?” This is what evangelism sounds like to unbelievers when the evangelist fails to anchor his message in God. It sounds like we are merely offering them some extra blessings and happiness in exchange for adding some religion to their lives. But the gospel is about far more than psychological comfort. It is a message that is proclaimed in the midst of a dire crisis, and this crisis exists because of the character of God and the sinfulness of man. This lesson will focus on the first of these two topics.

II. The Creator

The character of God is foundational because God is the Creator of all things. As the Creator, He possesses the right to command His creatures to love and obey Him. Over and over in Scripture God asserts His sovereign right to command and govern His creation (Ex 19:5; Lev 24:23; Num 3:12; Psa 50:10; Hag 2:8). He says, “Behold, all souls are Mine” (Ezek 18:4).

This truth is very important for the evangelist to remember when he is speaking with an unbeliever. He must remember that he has an authoritative message from the One who created and owns the unbeliever. Although the evangelist may not possess any actual authority over the unbeliever, he must remember that he is simply relaying a message from the Lord. Whether the unbeliever responds in repentance and faith or rejects the message with scorn, the evangelist must remember that he is proclaiming the gospel with the Lord’s authority (Matt 28:18) and that every unbeliever is

commanded to “obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thess 1:8).

III. The Holy One

An accurate explanation of the holiness of God is the difference between a false, man-centered gospel and the true, God-exalting gospel.

a. Definitions

My definition: The holiness of God refers to the perfection of His moral purity that exalts Him above all created things and makes Him supremely worthy of our reverence and adoration (Isa 6:3; Rev 4:8).

“Holiness implies absolute moral purity and separateness above the creation” (ESV Study Bible).

“He is morally and ethically perfect, abhorring sin and demanding purity in his moral creatures” (MacArthur, *Essential Christian Doctrine*).

“Holiness is in a peculiar manner the beauty of the divine nature” (Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections*).

“Holiness is His crown...the blessedness and nobleness of His nature...wherein the majesty of God is most illustrious...He is a pure and unmixed light, free from all blemish in His essence, nature, and operations... It is the glory of every perfection in the Godhead. As His power is the strength of them, so His holiness is the beauty of them” (Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*).

“God’s holiness means that He is separated from sin and devoted to seeking his own honor” (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*).

“God is in Himself the Holy One, the separate One, beyond or above the world, true light, spotless purity, the perfect One” (Keil and Delitzsch, *Isaiah*).

“Holiness is distinctness, the distinctness of the divine from all other things...The remarkable thing about the OT conception of holiness is a function of the OT understanding of God’s character. What was distinct about this deity was not so much his origin, his essence, or his numinous power. Rather, it was his attitude toward ethical behavior...For Isaiah as a Hebrew, it meant that the terrifying

otherness was not merely in essence but in character” (Oswalt, *Isaiah*).

b. Explanation

As you can see from the definitions above, theologians have wrestled to find sufficient language to express this attribute of God. It is this attribute of God which causes the mind to reel. Above all others, it is this attribute which produces adoration, awe, shock, and terror in men and angels who have seen God. It is the only attribute that is repeated three times (Isa 6:3; Rev 4:8). It is variously explained as referring to God’s majesty, purity, ethical beauty, or distinctness. Theologians may differ on the precise terminology they use to explain this attribute, but there is general agreement that God’s holiness is what fundamentally separates and exalts Him above all created things. The Hebrew term for “holy” and the contexts in which it is used support this understanding (Gen 2:2; Ex 3:5; Isa 6:3; Rev 4:8). He is the Holy Creator, the only absolute and perfect being. There is no being that may be compared to Him: ““To whom then will you liken Me that I would be his equal?’ says the Holy One” (Isa 40:25). He exists forever in a category by Himself.

But we must go further than this in explaining God’s holiness. He is holy, not only because He is the only God who exists, but also on account of His transcendent moral purity. In other words, He is holy because He loves righteousness with a perfect love and because He hates evil with a perfect hatred. He is utterly and absolutely opposed to sin, and He is utterly and absolutely devoted to moral goodness.

You are not like this, nor have you ever known anyone like this. You may know some Christians that you would describe as holy people, but we are not talking about a relative creaturely holiness. We are even going beyond the holiness of the holy angels who have remained in a state of perfect moral innocence. We are speaking of that absolute, infinite, and perfect holiness, that “beauty” (Edwards) and “crown” (Charnock) of God’s character that exalts Him infinitely above the best of created beings. To aid our feeble minds in understanding this attribute of God, Scripture provides two helpful illustrations.

c. Illustration 1: The Vision of Isaiah (Isa 6:1–7)

This is the classic text on the holiness of God. It describes a vision which the prophet Isaiah saw hundreds of years before the birth of Christ. It came to him in the midst of widespread idolatry and apostasy throughout Israel. You only need to

read the first chapter to understand the crisis this created. Through Isaiah's tongue and pen God accuses His people of transgression (1:2), sin, evil, corruption, apostasy (1:4), and rebellion (1:5). God compares them to Sodom and Gomorrah, the archetypes of sinful societies (1:10). What follows are numerous threats of judgment and urgent appeals to repentance. This is the context in which the holiness of God was revealed to Isaiah.

Here God commissions Isaiah to his prophetic ministry. God reveals His character to the prophet to show that He cannot stand idly by while Israel persists in its rebellion. God's holiness demands that He confront and punish sin. It is impossible for Him not to do so. To impress this reality upon Isaiah's mind and to fortify him for his difficult task, God gives him a glimpse into the throne room of heaven. Isaiah sees that even the Seraphim must veil their eyes in the presence of the Holy Lord, and this leads him to cry out in despair. If even the holy angels cannot stand to look directly upon the Lord, how can idolatrous Israel survive? Israel's sin has brought them to the point of crisis.

The Lord responds by assuring Isaiah of the forgiveness of sins. He will atone for the sins of those who respond in faith to the prophetic message. But whether He is judging or forgiving sin, God will never violate His holiness. In fact, God's holiness is the reason that He will remain faithful to His covenant people in spite of their unfaithfulness: "Your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel" (Isa 41:14). Ultimately, this reality is illustrated at the cross of Jesus Christ, where the holiness of God punished Jesus Christ in order to secure the forgiveness of sins for the elect.

- d. Illustration 2: The Consuming Fire (Ex 24:17; Deut 4:24; 9:3; 32:22; Isa 29:6; 30:27; 30:30; 33:14; Heb 12:29)

The second illustration that recurs through Scripture is that of the consuming fire. The glory of God appeared "like a consuming fire" on Mount Sinai (Ex 24:17). In the Law of Moses God explicitly refers to Himself as "a consuming fire" (Deut 4:24). He compares His wrath to a consuming fire that devours the earth (Deut 32:22). Sinners cannot dwell with the consuming fire (Isa 33:14). Furthermore, the NT confirms that this concept remains relevant for the Christian church: "Our God is a consuming fire" (Heb 12:29). It is not an idea that belonged only to the OT era.

The devouring flame is a picture of what must happen when holiness and sin collide. God's character is so utterly pure that He cannot leave sin unpunished. To

leave sin unpunished would be a stain upon His character. God has revealed this truth many times in the Bible. His glory appeared as a consuming fire upon Mount Sinai, and He consumed rebels with fire in the wilderness (Lev 10:1; Num 16:35). Sinners will be consumed with the eternal fire of hell (Matt 25:41; Rev 20:14).

IV. The Judge

Finally, the Bible teaches that God has chosen a day in the future when He will judge the world according to His perfect righteous standard. “He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:31). Everyone who has not been washed by the blood of Christ will stand before God and be judged according to what he has done (Rev 20:12–13). Therefore, unbelievers must be warned of the judgment to come. As Jesus said, “I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment” (Matt 12:36).

Homework

- Make a list of biblical illustrations for the holiness of God. These could be illustrations of holiness itself (e.g. the consuming fire) or examples when God has revealed His holiness by judging human sin. Knowing these biblical illustrations will help you communicate the concept of holiness to an unbeliever.
- Write a paragraph that explains the holiness of God in language that an unbeliever would understand. Use at least one Bible verse in your explanation. Try to also use at least one illustration (e.g. “the holiness of God is like…”).
- Read *The Gospel of Jesus Christ*, pgs. 5–7.
- Read *Essential Christian Doctrine*, pgs. 245–261.
- Continue praying for your three unbelieving friends or acquaintances. Start brainstorming ways that you could start a gospel conversation with them.