

Jason Upchurch - Systematic Theology - Theology Proper - Attributes Lesson 4 - Holy and Wise

This morning we return to our occasional look at systematic theology, which is the modern phrase we use for the term the Bible uses which is doctrine. Doctrine is the systematizing of a topic in the Bible. When you ask “What does the Bible say about politics or angels or war or self defense or should we pray to Mary?” you’re asking a theology question. Ethics questions are also theology: Should we use IVF or capital punishment or how do we think about property rights? We get the answer by looking at the broad scope of Scripture.

And Christians need to be well grounded in theology because we think and operate in theological terms all the time.

Two resources if you’re wanting to dig deeper: Both are by JI Packer: Knowing God is a great warm hearted devotional level theology. He also has a book called Concise Theology which gels down complex theology into a page or two. I’ve given that to camp staff in the past because it’s an excellent quick resource to answer questions campers have about hell, angels, predestination, demons, heaven.

So theology gives us a big picture view of what the Bible teaches about a variety of topics. And that takes time to do but it’s worth doing.

This is the 11th sermon in the series. We did 4 sermons on bibliology and 6 so far on theology proper. I actually added a page on our website that puts all of the systematic theology sermons together so if you just want to go through them in a series you can and my sermon notes are all there for you.

This morning we return to theology proper - what the Bible has to say about God himself. We’ve seen omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence. We’ve seen sovereignty, goodness and love and other attributes.

1) Holiness. And it’s hard to begin a discussion about God’s holiness without first looking at **Isaiah 6:1-7**. We read it before and we’ll read some again but here is where we see the holiness of God on display more clearly than any other part of the Bible.

God is said to be holy, holy, holy. Scholars call this the trihagion. Tri meaning 3, hagion meaning holy. This is the place where the Bible proclaims the thrice holy God.

I’m reading RC Sproul’s most famous book - the Holiness of God. It’s actually the first time I’ve ever read it. And he makes a point in there that different languages have ways of emphasizing things. In English when we write something we can bold it, or underline it, or italicize. We can emphasize it with words like very or most. Very holy. Most Holy and so on.

The Hebrew way to emphasize something is to repeat it. In Jonah the storm stormed. God threatens Adam that if he eats the fruit, dying he will die. You emphasize things in Hebrew by repeating them. But as Sproul notes, there is only one attribute of God in all the Bible that is emphasized 3 times and that is his holiness.

Nowhere in the Bible is God love, love, love. Or mercy, mercy, mercy. Or wrath, wrath, wrath. But here God is holy, holy, holy. **Read 1-4**

The scene we have here is that King Uzziah has just died and he was a good king. He had seemingly kept back the judgment of God on Judah for decades. He had been a king for over 50 years - that’s a really long time for a king to reign. That’s longer than I’ve been alive. I had to look up who was President before Carter because I didn’t know - it was Ford. He was president 50 years ago. Imagine one person reigning from Ford til now.

That was Uzziah and he had died. And what the Lord did for Isaiah was give him a vision of the true King. Not an earthly king whose reign would come and go. But a vision of the King of kings in all of his glory and majesty. And the vision he gets is so overwhelming and bright and amazing that really the only thing he can really pick out in middle of all that glory are some seraphim.

Seraphim are spiritual creatures. They’re a different class of creature than angel. Their name seraphim means burning ones. They themselves are glorious and bright and powerful awesome. And as they fly around the

throne of God, the bright brilliance and majesty of God is so amazing that even these burning ones who are completely without sin and are fitted for life in heaven flying around the throne have to shield themselves from the awesome blast of glorious majesty of the Lord God.

And as they shield themselves, the thing they are calling out over and over is holy, holy holy. Some 800 years later as the apostle John is writing the book of Revelation he has an almost identical vision of the Lord on the throne and these living creatures with the same six wings are saying the exact same thing. This is their station in the created order: to cry out around the throne of God extolling his holiness and greatness. And in Revelation it seems as though they are leading the hosts of heaven in falling down before the throne in worship to God.

It is an awesome, overwhelming sight. Holy, holy, holy. Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh.

What is holiness? I think it's basically two features that are linked together and we see them in this passage. The first feature is the transcendence of God. That's a big word, but what that word means is that God is absolutely set apart from everything.

Jl Packer (Concise Theology): "[it's] everything about God that sets him apart from us and makes him and object of awe, adoration, and dread."

Psalms 113:4: Yahweh is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens.

God is not the best of the created order. The Bible depicts God as so far above the created order that he is in a different classification all on his own.

Psalms 8:1: O Yahweh, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens!

The glory of God is far beyond anything his creation can contain. Imagine you've got a small Tupperware container and you want to contain the explosion of a hydrogen bomb with the Tupperware container. How do you contain that? You can't.

That's the glory of God over and beyond his created order. That's what transcendence means: its beyond us and anything we experience. That's why Isaiah was so overwhelmed.

So it's transcendence - that's the first feature of holiness. The second feature linked to transcendence is moral purity. And we see that here. Notice how Isaiah experience the full blast of the holiness of God. **Read 3-7**

So he sees this vision and his problem is that he is unclean. He has a filthy mouth. In the presence of God he is immediately overwhelmed by the filthiness of his sin. He instantly realizes he is guilty before God. He is morally not able to stand in the presence of the holy God because of his sin. And what he needs is cleansing. Purification.

There is something about the awesome majesty of God in holiness that makes us instantly - instantly - realize we are filthy, filthy sinners. He is so pure and so right and so good and morally excellent that the Bible often just simply says he is light. He *is* light and in him is no darkness at all **1 John 1:5**. John is talking about the complete moral purity of God Just as light itself can have no darkness because light is the opposite of darkness, so too God has no sin because he is the opposite of sin.

And so we have these two features (we'll call them) that make up God's holiness: transcendence - God is far above everything in greatness. And moral purity - God is perfectly without sin.

Some verses that specifically call God holy:

Psalms 99:9: Exalt Yahweh, our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for Yahweh our God is holy!

Amos 4:2:For Lord Yahweh has sworn by his holiness that, behold, the days are coming upon you when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks.

God promised Israel they would be judged. And he swore by his own holy character.

Isa. 1:4 God is called the Holy One of Israel.

And as Trinitarians we worship the Father, the Son, and who? The Holy Spirit. No one is Holy except the God alone. The Spirit whom we worship along with the Father and Son as the one God is defined by holiness. He's not grace Spirit, or love Spirit or gentle Spirit. He's the Holy Spirit. Completely transcendent and morally pure.

And this concept of holiness should always be on our mind as the children of God. In fact, it should be constantly in our prayers. **Turn to Matt. 6:9** and look at the Lord's Prayer.

You've probably memorized this passage, but notice how fundamental it is. **Read 9**

What does it mean "hallowed be your name?" It means we want God's name revered as holy by all people. Hallowed is a very unusual word. It's the word to glorify but it's in a passive voice. Meaning we can't do it on our own, but we want God to accomplish it for his own name.

That's the desire of our heart is that God is recognized as great and mighty and awesome and transcendent. And that he is recognized as morally pure beyond anything we can imagine.

God's holiness, by the way, is the reason we need the gospel. The reason we need the gospel is because God is holy. He is pure and righteous and cannot tolerate filthy sinners in his presence. We are unholy, unworthy, filthy sinners like Isaiah. And what we need is to have our sin removed, atoned for.

And what God does in Jesus is remove our sin as far as the east is from the west, and he purifies not with a hot coal, but with his own blood.

The holiness of God is why people need to be saved. Why we need cleansing. In fact, Christians in the Bible are called saints which means holy ones. The Catholic Church gets saints all wrong. They classify someone as a saint who they say was some great person. No; someone is a saint who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ alone for salvation. We become saints not because of good works we do, but because we have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus.

Turn to 1 Pet. 1 for a moment. So God is holy. Through faith alone in Jesus alone he makes us holy. And then he calls us to be holy. He call us to act like him. **Read 1:13-19**

So the holy God called us - he chose us and saved us and called us into the Kingdom - now what? We are to be holy. Why? Because God is holy.

We are called to the same moral purity that God has. Walking carefully in his ways, carefully in his commands, staying far, far away from sin. Conducting ourselves with fear during our little trek on the blue ball knowing we will stand before the holy God one day.

God is holy.

2) God is Wise. Let me just give you some passages to jot down.

Job 12:13: To God belong wisdom and power; counsel and understanding are his.

Dan. 2:20: Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might.

Rom. 16:27: God is called "the only wise God [to whom] be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prov. 2:6: For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

All wisdom and true understanding come from God. They flow from him. This is why if you don't know God or believe that there is no God, Scripture calls you a fool. If all wisdom comes from God and you reject God, you can't possibly be wise.

Now, what is wisdom? It's not just knowledge and information. We looked a few months ago that God is omniscient. He knows all things; that's a fundamental attribute of God.

But wisdom is different than simply knowing things. You've heard the phrase "the ends justify the means" or the "ends don't justify the means?" When we're talking about the wisdom of God, what we're talking about are means and ends.

God has sovereignly decreed all things to come to a certain end, and he has also decreed the means to those ends.

Wayne Grudem: "God's wisdom means that God always chooses the best goals and the best means to those goals" (Systematic Theo. Vol. 2)

If you think about shooting an arrow at a target. God has not only chosen what the target is, he has chosen the arrow and the bow and the flight path of the arrow through history to the target.

So the target and the way to the target are in God's hands and that is good. And I will tell you, of the attributes of God this is one of the hardest for us to truly praise God for because he's not always decreeing things we want. And he's not always bringing things to pass in the way we would.

I'll give you a couple of examples. The doctrine of hell, which we'll look at in a couple years. Hell is hard doctrine to truly embrace, even for believers. Hell is the place of everlasting torment where all who don't believe in Jesus go instantly upon their death. There's no second chances, no getting out, it's eternal conscious punishment forever.

And I think if most of us are honest we have probably asked "Well, why didn't God just make a plan where everyone is saved? I mean, he's God he can do anything and he could have done that." Or "Why are there so many people going to hell? Why not decree that more people go to heaven?"

And the answer is that in the wisdom of God, that's not what he ordained. The exact amount of people that he's chosen to save and the way in which he saves them is the most wise plan because that's what God has chosen. We saw this with goodness: something is not good and therefore God does it. God does something and therefore it's good.

The same is true for wisdom. The plan of God is wise and all the steps along the way are wise.

When we bought our first house, Obama was giving out cash money for first time home buyers. We got \$8,000 for just buying a house. But we had to live there 3 years. After a year and a half we moved up here and had to give all the money back to the IRS which we did. Then they said we messed up and gave us half the money back. Jodee sent them a letter saying, "No, you messed up and we owe you that money." So they sent us a letter saying "You're right, you owe us the money and you owe us a fine for having the money we sent back to you accidentally." Now, we sent a check with the money and the fine and a letter of explanation back to the IRS and eventually they sent us a check refunding the fine.

And to this day we have no idea why that all happened. Why? What was the point of that? And the backstop answer is that in the God's holy, sovereign wisdom he had us go through that crazy rigamarole. Now we could complain about it and whine about it and bash the IRS but at the end of the day God in his wisdom sought fit for us to have a certain end and means to the end whether we understand it or not.

This is true with your family, your health, your life, your job, politics, everything. See, if we knew what God knew, then we'd want what God wants.

If we knew what God knew, we'd ordain it the exact same way.

Turn to Rom 11. In Romans 9-11 Paul is talking about how Jews play a part in the ultimate plan of God in salvation. The reason for a 3 chapter long discussion is because Paul mentions that not a lot of Jews were coming to faith in Jesus. Why not? Is God not keeping his promises?

Paul says not all were chosen by God for salvation. But he also says that some were, just like in the days of Elijah where a small remnant didn't bow the knee to Baal. But for the most part Jews are hardened to the gospel - even today. And so what Paul did was to go preach to Gentiles about the Jewish Messiah. And what would happen is that the Gentiles would come to faith. And when they did that would stir up the Jews to jealousy and then they'd get saved. And so it's almost like the way that God saves the Jews throughout history is making them jealous of the Gentiles who are following their Messiah. **Read 11:11-16**

So Israel rejected the Messiah, and now we Gentiles are grafted in. And as we're grafted in Jews all also believe in Jesus. And as Gentiles we need to be very careful to not hate Jews; we want them to believe in Jesus. **Read 17-24**

So we're grafted in, we're not arrogant toward the Jews, we want to be saved. Our salvation stirs them up to salvation. That's how God is still working in the Jews - to this very day.

And if you step you think, "Man, that's not the plan I would sketched out for Israel's salvation." Paul acknowledges that. But God's plan is greater. **Read 28-36**

We often quote those last lines. And they're great lines. But the context is that from our perspective, the salvation of Jews comes about in a very unusual manner. But in this way the Gentiles God has chosen and the Jews God has chosen will all come to saving faith in Jesus.

It's complex. But it's the wisdom of God. Your salvation, your being grafted into the tree of Israel's promises and blessings is the wisdom of God.

And the gospel is often talked about as wisdom. **Turn to 1 Cor 1.** This is where Paul talks about how the people God normally chooses for salvation are losers. No offense, but most of us aren't anything special. We're that sludge at the bottom of the barrel of humanity that God scrapes out and uses for his glory.

This plan is foolishness to the world, to those who are perishing. But it's the wisdom of God. **Read 18-31**

Why did God choose the nothings, the weak, the poor? Because in his wisdom he knew that we wouldn't have anything to boast about. If God chose all the great people of society for salvation the temptation would be for them to boast in themselves. I'm smart so God chose me, I'm rich so God chose me. I'm nobility so God chose me.

No, God isn't sharing his glory with anyone, so in wisdom God chooses the lowest of the low. The basest of the base. So that we will only praise him for saving us.

So God's sovereign plan is for us to trust his wisdom in all things. In all situations and even in his choosing us for salvation. **Turn to Proverbs 2** for a minute. There's one other aspect of wisdom I want to touch on. And that's that we should want wisdom.

God is wisdom, it comes from him. And he tells us to go get it. We find that wisdom in the Word of God. **Read 1-15**

How do we get wisdom? By pursuing it. It doesn't come all on its own. It doesn't come by watching TV or movies. It doesn't come with age - I know some pretty foolish older folks.

It comes with immersing yourself in the Word of God, seeking him who is wisdom through his word. **Pray**