

JACKIE HILL PERRY

holier than thou

HOW GOD'S HOLINESS HELPS US TRUST HIM



FOREWORD *by*
CHARLIE DATES

JACKIE HILL PERRY

holier than thou

HOW GOD'S HOLINESS HELPS US TRUST HIM

FOREWORD *by* CHARLIE DATES

B&H
PUBLISHING
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Copyright © 2021 by Jackie Hill Perry
All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America

978-1-5359-7571-1

Published by B&H Publishing Group
Nashville, Tennessee

Dewey Decimal Classification: 231.4
Subject Heading: GOD / HOLINESS

Main translation is English Standard Version. ESV® Text
Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a pub-
lishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

Scriptures marked CSB are taken from The Christian
Standard Bible. Copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers.
Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible®, and CSB®
are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers,
all rights reserved.

Scriptures marked NIV are taken from The Christian
Standard Bible. Copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers.
Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible®, and CSB®
are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers,
all rights reserved.

Scriptures marked NLT are taken from New Living Translation,
copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation.
Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol
Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Scriptures marked Berean Study Bible are taken from Berean
Study Bible, BSB, Copyright ©2016, 2018 by Bible Hub, Used
by Permission. All Rights Reserved Worldwide.

Cover design and illustration by Matt Stevens.

It is the Publisher's goal to minimize disruption caused by
technical errors or invalid websites. While all links are active at
the time of publication, because of the dynamic nature of the
internet, some web addresses or links contained in this book
may have changed and may no longer be valid. B&H Publishing
Group bears no responsibility for the continuity or content of
the external site, nor for that of subsequent links. Contact the
external site for answers to questions regarding its content.

To my children, Eden, Autumn, and Sage.

This work wasn't written for you but around you. While you played, I studied and thought deeply about the nature of God. While you were away at school or in your rooms, I wrote as much of it as I could. At times you interrupted me with the want to tell me something or show me anything, and whenever you did, I thought to myself, *This is holy, too*. There is a child-like purity in the way you look to me for most things.

I pray that what is written next is what you've seen me obey so that when each of you is old enough to read Mommy's words and understand the holy God it explains, that if and when you make the decision to be like Mommy, my example actually means you will be more like God.

Acknowledgments

Preston, Mother, and Dana, Thank you
Austin, Devin, and Ashley, Thank you
Father, Son, and Spirit, Thank You

Contents

Foreword by Charlie Datesxi
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Holy, Holy, Holy	11
Chapter 2: Holy, Holy Holy: Moral Perfection	33
Chapter 3: Holy, Holy, Holy: Transcendence	63
Chapter 4: Unholy gods: Idolatry.	81
Chapter 5: Holy Justice	105
Chapter 6: Holy How?: Holy Vision	127
Chapter 7: Holy How?: Behold, We Become	151

foreword

DEEP INSIGHTS INTO THE character of God don't come without great trial. Ask Moses. He spent the better part of forty years in ignominy until he met God at that burning bush. His life in the wilderness was more of a personal and professional desert than it was an address in the backwoods of desolation. Some of the best revelation about God, however, came at the expense of his personal wasteland.

Ask Ruth. A Moabite bereft of kinsmen, pelted on the fringes of sixth-century womanhood, but determined to see providence run its course. Her story and lineage bequeath to us pieces of the mystery of God on the canvass of her struggle.

Nobody experiences revelation without some great cost. Sometimes, the tariff is our own transgression. Ask David. Somewhere between Bathsheba and Absalom, his life became the studio for melodies from heaven. Much of the godly music we sing today hearkens from his trumpet of tribulation.

HOLIER THAN THOU

Ask Jackie. The book you hold in your hand was forged through time and trial. Jackie paid to write this book. Something of her weariness leaks through the ink on these pages. None of us come to love God deeply, to see Him clearly without first having an awakening to our internal depravity which can lead to a fuller appreciation of God's holiness. Something of the richness of her treasures found hide here in plain sight.

Every era needs its own prophet of holiness; a kind of living invitation to marvel in the beauty of God's holiness, and in the holiness of His beauty. It's the last part that grabs me: the holiness of His beauty. Our culture is bedazzled with images of fleeting majesty. We are so easily let down. The glisten of gold from Wall Street to Main Street bids anew on each passing generation. Sephora and Mac do their best to hide the spots and wrinkles of our worn countenances. Fame and influence beckon our singular devotion for their possession. We humans are on the hunt for a beauty that does not fade only to discover that it does fail.

While we need a prophet of holiness, now is not the time for empty moralism and pious irrelevancies. Neither of those is sufficient to sustain or satisfy. So many of our sermons and books, whether conservative or liberal, are but moral manifestos disguised as scholarly exegesis. We tire quickly of cold commands. We need a grander vision of God even if the window from which we see Him is small.

FOREWORD

This book is a wide vision through a narrow window. I want to warn you, however. The complex enigma which is God's holiness is literally indescribable. Our best attempts are but anthropomorphic images, metaphors to decode mystery. Truth is, words will not do. God must be experienced. That, friend, is a frightening proposition. Few people, from Moses to D. L. Moody, could barely contain the awful joy after such an encounter. So, get ready. The words bound between these pages are like the rungs of a ladder to that vista where the subject is as glorious as the object.

I told Jackie that she is a gifted communicator, but I'm stunned that the readability is likewise so profound. Like an apologist and logician, she argues for our most reasonable faith. She has served her generation well. When A. W. Tozer wrote that "God is looking for men and women in whose hands His glory is safe," he must have been thinking about a captivated saint like Jackie.

I read this book and wanted more of God.

I poured over its pages with both interjection and applause.

I wasn't ready for the bliss that found me.

Here it is. Read it and weep for joy.

Dr. Charlie Dates, senior pastor of Progressive Baptist Church and an affiliate professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Baylor's George W. Truett Theological Seminary

Introduction

TONI MORRISON ONCE SAID, “If there’s a book that you want to read, but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it.”¹ So here I am, writing.

Walk into a seminary, peruse an aisle, ask your pastor for his favorite, your friend for hers, your father for his, and they will all have a “holy” book to offer you. I’ve read so many of them at this point, and the shape of my soul, the stretch of my mind, and this work you hold is the proof. I honor the likes of G. E. Patterson, John Onwuchekwa, R. C. Sproul, A. W. Tozer, Stephen Charnock, and David Wells for how they helped me to think about the subject. I dignify gospel songs like “Nobody Greater,” “Nobody Like You, Lord,” and “Nobody Like Jesus” for putting melody to it. I remember my Aunt Merle, the first holy woman I knew. I know a halo when I see it because of her little brown self. She wore it always. That haloed woman, I honor too. These

¹ Ellen Brown, “Writing Is Third Career for Morrison,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, September 27, 1981.

HOLIER THAN THOU

influences have been good to me, but even with their help, I still had questions about the holy subject they introduced me to.

I don't remember the day I thought about it and if my coffee was iced or warm. What I know is that what I thought, and what I thought of, I wanted an answer for: "If God is holy, then He can't sin. If God can't sin, then He can't sin against me. If He can't sin against me, shouldn't that make Him the most trustworthy being there is?"

It's possible that I thought about people before this and the reasons why I don't trust *them*. People are incredibly problematic, to say the least. They're born into this place with bad blood and inconsistent intentions, and of course, this isn't what any of them (me included) was created to be. God made us to image Himself. To exist in the world in such a way that when observed, whoever looked at us could accurately imagine God. But when you add in an inquisitive demon, a woman deceived, a man's forbidden bite, and God's law broken because of it, what you don't have left is native goodness. You have the generational inheritance of everything unholy which makes everyone with it unlike God. The same impulse that lifted Cain's hand and necessitated the crying voice of his own brother's blood is within every person alive. This, I believe, is the root of every reason we don't trust people. We know that if a person is a sinner,

INTRODUCTION

then bad behavior is always a possibility and God forbid we get too close and they make an Abel out of us. We distrust as protection (wisely at times) from the lift of their hand and the cry of our own blood. Whether the killing is verbal, emotional, or physical, we keep ourselves from the potential of all three because we've seen our own sinful nature and have experienced enough sins against us to know that sinners aren't trustworthy.

What about God, though? Is He as negligent as everyone else? Is He a being with the potential to be as bad as us? As Cain and his father, the first sinner? If not, why do we treat Him like we do all the others? Is it that we've mistaken the Second Adam for the first and have thought of Him as a "better" version of ourselves? Is it that we think His goodness, though great, isn't consistent? Or that His commands are true only when they don't hurt? As if when His instruction costs you an arm, leg, or life, then He must be lying? What I am trying to get at is that somewhere lurking at the bottom of our unbelief is the thought that God isn't holy. One goal of this work you're holding is to prove that "if" doesn't belong in front of "God is holy." Since He is, as the following chapters will show, He can and should be trusted.

According to the writer of Hebrews, without faith, it's impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). So then, faith must

HOLIER THAN THOU

always be a part of the discussion of how we're to interact with Him. Without it, we are damnable. With it, we move mountains. Without it, we are an unstable sea, having two minds in one body. With it, we are a home, built on a rock. When the winds come to throw its weight against the frame, it—or should I say *we*—will not break. It makes sense why of all the things the serpent could come for, it is our faith he attacks most. By walking through the Scriptures, we will see the Holy God as He is so that we can place our faith in who He has revealed Himself to be. Faith isn't optional in this case. We must trust God like our life depends on it because it does.

From this faith in God, fruit grows. Holiness shows up in us, making us trustworthy, honest, self-controlled, gentle, wise, pure, and more. As obvious as it seems, our own efforts at sanctification are not always framed in this way—that faith in Christ and who He has revealed God to be precedes holiness. The call to a holy life has commonly presented God's hatred of sin as the primary incentive of purity in contrast to exalting God Himself as the reason. I was raised under that technique. Where the preacher stood erect behind the pulpit to tell me the truth. That without holiness, no man would see the Lord. That as a sinner, God would do me like He did Sodom, scaring me and all the other kids in my youth group into pseudo-sanctity.

INTRODUCTION

The discernible problem is twofold: I wasn't provided with a vision of the Holy God that explained His infinite worth, denying me the joy of what happens when God Himself is the incentive for repentance. Nor was I handed a shovel and encouraged to dig beneath my sins and see what was underneath so as to give me context for why I sinned as I did.

The soil from which all sin grows is unbelief. We sin because it is our nature to do so, but it's not as if we always sin unintentionally, like depraved robots without the ability to behave according to reason. We are thoughtful with our rebellion. There is a level of reasoning within us when we decide which golden calf we'll love on any given day. With that said, the foundation of our idolatry, the sin begetting all others, is a specific belief about God. Our perverse sexual ethics, wild tongue, religious superiority, dark thoughts, legalistic posture, mean ways, impatient moods, greedy antics, intellectual arrogance, and rebellious tendencies come out of what we believe about the living God. I'm not referring to the temptation of these acts, but to the practice. We do one or all of the above when we have made the decision not to believe, trust, acknowledge, or depend on who God has revealed Himself as in some way.

Let's take the "Rich Young Ruler," for example, who comes to Jesus with a necessary question: "What must I

HOLIER THAN THOU

do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17–22; Matt. 19:16–22; Luke 18:18–23). There’s something admirable about the nameless ruler that he’d want to know how to live forever, but notice how he addresses the One who knew. He calls Jesus “good teacher.” Ignoring “teacher,” Jesus pokes at his superficial application of “good.” “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.” The implication is obvious. The ruler has come with a question for a teacher he considers good but not God. This belief is so authentic to the ruler that he’s sincere when speaking to the incarnate God, who alone is good, when he says he’s kept His law, as if to say that he is *good* too. What he thinks of Jesus drives how he thinks of himself, which sets the stage for his refusal to sell everything he has so that Jesus could be his ultimate treasure. If Jesus is just good but not God, then the command to follow Him is optional. Not only that, if Jesus is just good but not God, then technically, He isn’t any *better* than what the ruler had much of. Why give up good things for a smart man unless the truth is that this man is God too and thus better than every good thing there is? To choose such a truth would make surrender a matter of exchanging broken cisterns for living water, the lot of the blessed ones who hunger and thirst, who will be filled because they believed about God what He said of Himself (Ps. 107:9; Jer. 2:13; Matt. 5:6). Can you see that just like

INTRODUCTION

the young ruler, what we believe about God will determine how we behave?

If that is the case, I suspect that many of the methods and messages related to holiness may actually be encouraging the opposite, leading to an earth-grown morality rather than a heaven-sent righteousness. If and when holiness is prescribed in a way that doesn't involve addressing the underlying belief systems leading to sin, we're potentially fumbling the ball. Let's say that a person decided to go to somebody's church, sit in their pew, sing their songs, then a sermon about holiness goes forth. In it they hear things like, "Take up your cross and die daily." And "You cannot serve God and money." What good does it do the hearer if they believe God is a liar? They disobey because they don't believe Jesus has life in Himself, real life, better than any superficial life the world offers. If this isn't brought to the surface, will they trust His call to die or will they imagine that life is just fine without Him? What if there is no talk of God's supreme value—how, as God, He is better than everything that exists? Without it, what incentive is there to eliminate a lesser master in exchange for a good One? What motivation is there to believe that God is more faithful than their income? We have supposed that the way to help people be holy is to just tell them to "stop sinning," when

HOLIER THAN THOU

in fact, lasting transformation is a spiritual consequence of “beholding the glory of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18).

That’s why we’re here: to behold. To set our sights on a higher love. To see who Adam hid from, who the psalmists sang to, who the prophets spoke for, who the disciples walked with, and who Jesus made known. I know that “holy” comes with a world of baggage. We think of it and imagine boredom incarnated. A smile-less woman. An uptight man who looks as if he’s never loved anything at all. From our experience with the religious and how it makes some people mean as a bull, we may think holiness looks like them. Distant, cold, knowledgeable of the Scriptures and ignorant of the heart. Whether it is joyless or callous, neither describes God.

God’s holiness is essential to His nature and fundamental to His being. His holiness is what makes Him good, and loving, and kind, and faithful. Without holiness, God wouldn’t be beautiful, and so because of it, He is eternally attractive. Think about the opposite of it being present in Him and you may see my point. If He were sovereign, but wicked, with no inner righteousness to restrain His hand, I wouldn’t be surprised if the world was no more. If He had all power without love, our refusal to love Him back would result in cosmic abuse or maybe a million more floods with no rainbow to promise His relent. If He were an unholy

INTRODUCTION

God, what would salvation even mean? What is deliverance to a self-centered “savior”? Thankfully, our God is incomprehensibly holy and therefore completely beautiful in all of His ways and works. This is why we are invited to worship Him as such, and in so doing, we become just as beautiful as He is.

What’s coming after this is simple. I’m writing what I’ve wanted to read. The words that explain the beauty of God in His holiness have already been written to us through the inspired words of Scripture, so know that I’m not going to say anything new. I’m just being faithful to what I believe Scripture has described which I haven’t heard enough of. So if there is anything I want this work to do, it’s to show you God. There is no one greater. No one better. No one worthy of our entire selves, and I believe that as you see Him as He is, you’ll want to be just like Him too.

Holy.

Chapter 1

Holy, Holy, Holy

IMAGINE YOURSELF AS AN Israelite. Egypt and its gods are a recent memory. There are fifty days between you and the sea that divided itself in half so you could walk on dry ground. In the desert now, you're told that in three days, you're going to meet God. God? Yes, God. You've never seen His face, but you can suspect how He might be when you remember His ways. You remember the day when the water turned red and the river bled out. When all of the dust beneath your feet began to crawl. When one morning, the wind blew, bringing with it a swarm of locusts so large they covered the sun, making everything black and eating everything green. On the last night, right in the middle of it, you heard what sounded like a communal sadness. You remember how afraid you were that the sorrow down the street was on its way to your home—a traveling grief? Desperate to know if the blood on your door kept your

HOLIER THAN THOU

firstborn from a sovereign death, you put your face to theirs until you felt breath. The blood worked.

Now the day has come for you and the rest of Israel to meet God for yourselves. It's morning, and in your tent, you watch as shadows grow all around you. The sun isn't shining as bright as it typically does, and you wonder why. As you converse with your own curiosity, what sounds like thunder reaches into the space around you. You can't tell if it's at the same time or not, but one second after the noise, lighting scatters across the clouds like confetti on fire. There's no rain to accompany either, but there's a trumpet played by only God knows who that's loud enough for you and all of Israel to know the musician isn't human. Your hands shake. Your heart paces, back and forth. You look at your firstborn and remember to breathe.

You're at the bottom of the mountain now. Close enough to see it's wrapped in smoke. Far enough to stay alive. You follow your line of sight, past the bottom of it and the burning parts, all the way up to the top where smoke shoots out of the mountain's mouth and levitates into the clouds—the very same place the invisible trumpet player must've been located. Clearly discontent with the initial volume of his instrument, the sound of it gets louder and louder. As it plays, you get it now. You're realizing that you were delivered from Pharaoh in Egypt so you could

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY

meet the King in the desert. You're recognizing the difference between this God and the others. That unlike them, creation does this God's bidding and not the other way around. He seems to be above it and everyone. Different than Egypt's gods who were imagined into being. Those gods imaged their makers because they too were *made*. They too were immoral, expecting of Egypt a righteousness easy enough for any of Eve's children to keep. This God expects nothing less than an awful¹ obedience from you and everything else, and you know it. The plagues sit in the back of your mind as a reminder of what kind of King you're about to meet. One that can use rivers and bugs and reptiles and nature itself against you. Like your hands, the mountain shakes. Like your heart, it can't get still because now, finally, in the midst of the thunder smack, the fire-lit sky, and the trumpet blast, descending on the mountain in fire is God. If you didn't know it then, you know it now, that this God, this King, is holy.

For you have not come to what may be touched,
a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a
tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a
voice whose words made the hearers beg that

¹ "Awful: filled with awe; deeply respectful or reverential" (*Merriam-Webster*).

HOLIER THAN THOU

no further messages be spoken to them. . . . Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” . . . But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God . . . Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire. (Heb. 12:18–19, 21–22, 28–29)

God Is Holy

Israel saw with their eyes what we’ve come to know by faith, that God is holy. To say that God is holy is to say that God is God. All of God’s ways, such as His moral purity and how it sets Him apart from all that is perverse, untrue, lawless, and unrighteous comes out of His being. No one told or taught God how to be good; that is simply who He is, and He can be no other way. As Stephen Charnock put it, “God is good as he is God; and therefore good by himself and from himself, not by participation from another.”² It is His very nature to be righteous, as in right, as in

² Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, volumes 1–2 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1874), 221.

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY

conforming to a set standard of morality, the standard being Himself. We are only good insofar as we are like God, so then, any attempt to be holy is an attempt to be like God. Simply put, the two are inseparable, holiness and God's being, that is.

There are times when our conversations around the holiness of God make it seem as if holiness is a *part* or *piece* of God. That God moves in between attributes when deciding how to be. That one day, He chooses to be loving. Another day, He chooses to be vengeful. That if God were a sweet potato pie, holiness is one slice of it that's set aside from the others. On one plate is holiness; on another plate is love. However, holiness is not an aspect of God; holy is who He is through and through. His attributes are never at odds with one another, nor do they switch places depending on God's mood; they are *Him*. "God *is* his attributes. That means, all that is in God simply is God."³ When God loves, it is a holy love. When God reveals Himself as judge, pouring out His cup on the deserving, He has not ceased to be loving, or holy either. In all that He is and all that He does, He is always Himself.

³ Matthew Barrett's essay, "Divine Simplicity," <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/divine-simplicity/>.

HOLIER THAN THOU

Even now, I hope you're beginning to see the glory of God. I don't mean that hypothetically either. Since holiness is essential to God, shining through all that He is and whatever He does, it means that there has never been or will ever be a time when God is not God. To say it another way, there will never come a day when God ceases to be holy; if that were possible, it would be the day He ceased to be God. Knowing that as an absolute and unmovable truth colors everything we understand about God's ways and works.

Holiness Revealed in Creation

In creation, He was holy. Man was made to image His righteousness, and all the other things like the sky, the ground underneath it, and the animals on it were judged as good by God. When He applies the word to anything, He is telling the truth, for if anybody knows how to use it the right way it would be Him. The rich young ruler put "good" in his address to Jesus, to which Jesus asked him *why*. Why call Him good if only God is? This wasn't a denial of He whose divinity was veiled. It was to say that the attribution of good as it related to Jesus was to tell the truth about who He really was. If good, then God. If God, then good. A good God makes good things. Good? All of the time.

Holiness Revealed in the Fall

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY

After the two goodie-two-shoes took them off to place their feet on unholy ground, the bad things came. With sin came judgment. As judge, God is holy still. Some finite folk can't seem to reconcile this, that judgment is a *good (holy)* thing. I'm not omniscient in any way. I'm completely blind to the motives that move them to make up things about what should or shouldn't be true about the Holy One, but if I had to guess, I'd say their lack of applause for God's justice comes out of their desire for Him to be like them: unrighteous. "It is too common for men to fancy God not as he is but as they would have him; strip him of his excellency for their own security."⁴ If they had it their way, the guilty could go about life unpunished, freed from judgment as underneath the stayed gavel of God. The problem with that is this: to want God to withhold justice is to want God to make Himself an abomination. "He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the LORD" (Prov. 17:15). This would be for Him to become a loathsome, detestable being, more like Satan than Himself. It's an impossible ask and borderline blasphemous, so as God is, He will remain. Holy and therefore just. "But the LORD of hosts is exalted in justice,

⁴ Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God*, 172.

HOLIER THAN THOU

and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness” (Isa. 5:16).

Holiness Revealed in Redemption

In the redemption of souls, God is holy. Out of His righteousness, God gave a law. At first, it was to not eat. If obeyed by faith in the purity and worth of the lawgiver, the two garden misfits would've continued in His love. Refusing this, their nature was eventually inherited by every generation. One that loves the dark more than the Son. Born like them too, Israel was provided with a written law. A set of commands, good ones in fact, that imaged God in its insistence to do right by Him and others. None of them saw such behavior as a good thing, of course. Who *wants* to love God above all things when there are so many deficient alternatives for which to place our affections? The gods they collected were an incomplete thing. Like cisterns broken all up, wasting water all over the place. These lesser gods were unable to make anyone who trusts in them whole; neither could they transcend their created nature if ever they were asked to deliver. But, Israel loved their idols still, and so do we.

As is expected of God, then, judgment must come down on the heads of those with a hesitant “yes, Lord.” His righteousness will not allow the guilty to go unpunished.

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY

Scary, to fall into the hands of the living God, until we believe in the One who did so in our place. The cross reveals God's holiness in how the sinless Son was judged on behalf of sinful people so that when God justifies the guilty, He does so without compromising His righteousness. The Holy Spirit is then sent to fill and sanctify us as a means of restoring our divine resemblance, helping us to wear the right clothes and two good shoes, wherein we "put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:24). From the beginning with creation, in our redemption and eventual glorification, God's holiness is revealed.

Holy, Holy, Holy

To go deeper into what Scripture means when it testifies that God is holy, let's glean from Isaiah's vision of Him. In the sixth chapter of the book titled after the prophet's name, written in it is the song of the seraphim. About God they say to one another, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" (v. 3). Notice the word used thrice. It isn't "love, love, love" or "good, good, good" but "holy, holy, holy."

Why is that important? Well, in Hebrew language and literature, the use of repetition was common practice. Jesus used it often by beginning his lessons with the

HOLIER THAN THOU

words “Truly, truly.” By this, His listeners knew that all that was to follow was significant and true. Rarely in Scripture do you see this literary device used to the third degree; never do you see it used to the third degree to address an attribute of God except here in Isaiah and in Revelation 4:8 (“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty”). With all three “holys,” the seraphim are emphasizing the absolute, unalterable, essential, and total holiness of God.

To say that God is holy, holy, holy is to say that God is *most* holy. He is totally holy. Completely holy. Unwaveringly holy. Utterly holy. If you’re in need of more words to describe the emphatic nature of God’s holiness, the thesaurus offers up these in addition to the word *most*: *greater, highest, utmost, uttermost*. So then, God’s holiness is great. The highest holy. He is holy to the uttermost. The Lord is holy beyond comparison for His holiness is not a derivative of some other source. His holiness is intrinsic to His nature as God. It’s as essential to Him as creaturely dependence is to us. Of all the songs to sing to one another, of all the divine attributes worth praising God for, Isaiah saw the seraphim make melody around the supreme holiness of God.

Like trees, words have roots. Dig underneath the letters’ soil and you’ll discover its definition. The root word of “holy” means “to cut” or “to separate.” When applied to everything outside of God, whatever is holy is whatever is

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY

set apart unto and for God. For example, God sanctified the Sabbath day, setting it apart from all other days as one in which His people were to rest in Him. That's why the Sabbath is called holy throughout the Old Testament. God separated it; He set it apart. In another example, the ground on which Moses stood was called holy, not because the dirt was divine but because the presence of the Holy One sanctified it, setting it apart from all other ground (Exod. 3:5).

There's a sermon by the great Tony Evans⁵ in which he uses an illustration involving dishes to make sense of the term "holy." In his home, and in most homes really, there are two *types* of dishes. There are the regular dishes. The ones you corner off with French fries and squirt with ketchup. Those dishes that contain the average meal, on normal days, for your ordinary and unimpressive breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Some of them are chipped, maybe even cracked, and if they are, you don't whine over their disposal because they were never made to be special anyway.

Then there is another type of dish. These dishes don't even see the light of day until a tall green tree with multi-colored lights flicker them onto the dining table. Something

⁵ Tony Evans sermon, "The Secret to Powerful Prayer," (September 15, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVkC-zzubWY>.

HOLIER THAN THOU

significant has to be happening under the roof to make their use a necessity. And when all is normal again, the candles have been blown out, the wrapping paper has been scattered and collected, the guests have finally gotten up from the table, these dishes, after being cleaned, aren't placed in the cabinets with the French fry and ketchup plates. Those are too typical and regular for their company. They're placed in an entirely different cabinet that may be in an entirely different room, separated from everything unlike them because there is nothing in the house like them. They are set apart, unique, different, other, distinct, cut off from what's considered common. To put it metaphorically, these dishes are "holy."

So to say of God that He is holy is to identify His position as a being that is set apart. From what or who is God separated from though? Holy people and things are holy only if they are separated unto God, but who is God set apart from? The answer is simple. God is unique, different, other, and distinct from everything that exists.

Moving backward to the beginning of the sixth chapter of Isaiah, what the seraphim say about God is observed by Isaiah. He says, "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple" (v. 1). First of all, it is when Uzziah dies, as in "gives up the ghost," that Isaiah

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY

sees God. Which is to say that though Uzziah is dead, God is alive. This may seem like an obvious truth that doesn't have much to do with holiness, but you are missing the point if you thought that for yourself. God isn't holy simply because He's alive. If that were the case, anybody with breath could be classified as holy. God is holy because God has *always* been alive, and after every king, person, plant, star, or moon passes away, He will still *be*. Even though all life begins with God, with God, there is no beginning. Another way to say it is that God is *self-existent*. He exists because He exists. He needs no one but Himself to *be*; therefore He always has and will always *be*.

Now, compare God to everything and tell me what you see. What I hope you noticed is that everything that exists has a beginning, is a derivative, is contingent upon something else for its life. Paul describes our lot as creatures, pointing to how it's only in God that we "live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Can the same be said about God? Of course not. This is what is referred to as God's *transcendence*. It means that God is totally unique from everything there is. God doesn't exist and cannot exist in the same way as we do or anything for that matter; setting Him apart from all creation as a being that is distinct from it: holy. So, in this, we see that God's holiness is about moral purity, yes, and it's also about transcendent,

HOLIER THAN THOU

self-existing otherness. It's about being totally right *and* eternally existent. Which, of course, only God is.

Isaiah sees the living God and calls Him “King, the LORD of Armies” (6:5 CSB). If the term “lord” was said of another, it wouldn't necessarily mean the person was holy. Such as Abraham who was called “lord” by Sarah, signifying the authority he holds as her husband. Or an owner of land, who in one case was called “the man, *the lord* of the land” who “spoke roughly to us and took us to be spies of the land” (Gen. 42:30, emphasis added). “Lord” in these cases convey a sense of “ownership” or “rights” one has over something. What makes the Lord as Isaiah sees Him different from that of Abraham is that as Sarah's husband, there's a covenantal ownership at play, where she is his and he is hers (1 Cor. 7:4), but Abraham could never claim sovereign authority over his wife or any other human being for that matter. He cannot treat her as if she existed because of him or that her life and being was ultimately dependent on him. The Lord being praised as holy is so because the titles “King” and “Lord of Armies” imply that He isn't merely an owner of something; He is the owner of everything—He is King of all the earth and ruler of the forces of heaven, too. Not with a few rights for which He has claim but with irrevocable rights over all that was made because all that was made was by His hand, for His glory.

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY

He is Lord because He is King and Creator. From Him came all things, the heavens and the earth of course. The world is His, with it are the hills, on it are the cattle that know Him as maker: “For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine” (Ps. 50:10–11). God is Lord over the heavens, the earth that holds us, and Lord of the body to which we try our hardest to keep to ourselves. “The body is not meant for sexual immorality, *but for the Lord . . .*” (1 Cor. 6:13, emphasis added). With the Lord, there is a sovereign rule befitting Him as Master of all and servant of none.

Uzziah’s authority over the small piece of the world that God allowed him to govern was limited in scope and time. Judah, with its millions of folks, was but dust compared to the universe to which God is Lord. His reign, Uzziah’s that is, was all of fifty-two years. That’s no petty amount of turned clocks, but it doesn’t compare to the eternity for which God will always reign. He is the King of kings and so much more, “For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God . . .” (Deut. 10:17). No being exists as sovereign over all but God—holy.

The Holy God is alive and well, as King of all who sits in a special way. The state of God’s throne is one that is

HOLIER THAN THOU

seen as “high and lifted up” (Isa. 6:1). You might think the mention of this is about altitude, and it might be in one way, but it’s not simply that of geographical position but of preeminence. Height equivocates to the status of supreme. It speaks to the excellence of His being. God is high and lifted up because God is superior over all. He is infinitely valuable because He alone is God. He is “the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy . . .” (Isa. 57:15). We fancy the earth to be something special and it is because God made it that way, but even with all of its derived glory and perceived value, to God it is like a piece of furniture on which He places His feet. He said it Himself, “the earth is my footstool” (Isa. 66:1).

In other words, God rules with power He doesn’t have to borrow. Upholding the world’s orbit and the sun’s heat with a strength Samson knew not of. He is majestic, a King with no equal. Every throne below Him is minuscule and without comparison. His ways are high and *higher* than ours because He is. He is the Most High, as in, He is exalted over everything that is because everything that is, might be good, but they will never be God. Everything wonderful that you have ever known—love, food, sex, laughter, friends, parents, children, sleep, work, money, you name it—can’t compete with the beauty of God. The Most High calls Himself the Holy One and asks: “To whom then will

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY

you compare me, that I should be like him?” (Isa. 40:25). No one, Lord—holy.

If the singing wasn't enough for the prophet to bear, the sight of God, the robe's train claiming every inch, with nowhere to go and no strength to move, the foundations shook (v. 4). As the temple shivered without a breeze, Isaiah didn't praise. He knew the right things to say, true things. That before Him was “the LORD of hosts” (6:3) and the “Mighty One of Israel” (1:24). He could've invited himself into the seraphim's song as they called to one another about the King, their holy hymn. He decided against it, choosing instead to make his first word a familiar one: “Woe.”

“Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (6:5). After seeing the holy God, Isaiah then saw himself. What he knew instantly was that between him and God, only one was truly holy. In the presence of the Lord, his guilt was obvious, his sins were bright, uncovered, exposed, broadcasted without a screen. Loud without a button to mute them or a finger to shush the noise. He confessed the defilement of his tongue which communicated the pollution native to his nature.

HOLIER THAN THOU

Of all the actions he could have taken, why do we see Isaiah confessing? Why are *words* what come out of him in such a moment? Because the mouth reveals what the heart holds. Jesus spoke to this when He said, “But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person . . .” (Matt. 15:18–20a). To be a man of “unclean lips” was to be a man who is unclean, period.

Isn't it interesting how simply being in proximity to God creates a moral self-awareness in Isaiah and others?⁶ That there is something about God that is so pure, even if unspoken, that when near Him, it becomes so plain that nothing is like Him, especially in terms of righteousness. It is not as though God *did* anything for Isaiah to be so terrified. God didn't even tell Isaiah He was holy at all; the seraphim did. God didn't move, come near, rise up or down; He simply *sat*, and that was enough for Isaiah to see his own wickedness. Just by being close, Isaiah's heart and its ways were impossibly noticeable. They were also discerned truthfully. He knew his lips were *unclean* and his community

⁶ This is further explored in chapter 2, when we behold the interaction between Peter and Jesus.

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY

with it. He let reality determine how he saw himself rather than using some pretty and undamnable word in exchange. He was a prophet who was more honorable in how he spoke and lived than that of the context to which he was called to prophesy against. If he'd stood there and within his mind, he put the nature of his speech next to them who called evil good and good evil, he might've thought himself pure. But before God—the One in whose mouth there is no deceit, whose perfections are unreachable, whose standard sits beyond the clouds and nowhere near close to any sky we could touch on our own—Isaiah knew he was a sinner.

The dramatic nature of Isaiah's clarity about his sinfulness highlights the moral excellence of the Lord who caused it. It's the intensity of what he learned about himself that proves that the high-and-lifted-up God is also *light*, as in, morally pure. "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). Light is often used as a metaphor for righteousness. In Proverbs, "But the path of the *righteous is like the light* of dawn" (Prov. 4:18, emphasis added). In Philippians, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be *blameless and innocent*, children of God *without blemish* in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you *shine as lights* in the world" (Phil. 2:14–15, emphasis added). Jesus is called "the light

HOLIER THAN THOU

of the world” that if followed, He will give them “the light of life” (John 8:12).

Since God is light, God has no darkness. No evil within Him. No blemished heart or unclean hands. His thoughts are always good, His motives always pure. Tozer commenting on God’s holiness says, “He is absolutely holy with an infinite, incomprehensible fullness of purity that is incapable of being other than it is.”⁷

In the morning, when the sun stands up and shines on your part of the world, look toward it if you can and know that the Holy God is more brilliant than that. The radiant, incandescent light beaming forth from God’s being has an illuminating effect. As it is with any source of light, it removes shadows, points to what was hiding behind it, tattle tales on the dark, and makes it acknowledge the secrets it couldn’t keep. Anyone that loves evil hates light because of this. “For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed” (John 3:20). The contemporary man keeps his Bible closed in an attempt to quench its light. Others manufacture half-truths about God or refuse orthodoxy as a way to keep the Son out. Isaiah did neither, and he couldn’t

⁷ A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1961), 105.

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY

even if he tried. When by the throne of the Holy One, the supreme virtue of His very being forced everything in Isaiah that didn't look like God to come out of hiding.

In the sixth chapter of Isaiah, we are provided with a vision of God that sets the table for our holy communion with Him. As we already saw, His holiness is both His transcendence and His moral purity. Both His incredible value over and above all things and His irrevocable commitment to the honoring of His name. A Lord who uses His power for good. A King without blemish. On a throne independent of time. He is high and lifted up and yet holy enough to humble Himself to death. Rising again to sit in His rightful place, where the creatures sing what is true about Him (Rev. 4:8). Through Him, we've received a kingdom that can't be shaken. Coming to Him, we have met with God. And we now know what we might not have known before. That this God and this King is holy.

IF GOD IS HOLY, THEN HE CAN'T SIN

If God can't sin, then He can't sin against you. If He can't sin against you, shouldn't that make Him the most trustworthy being there is?

Bestselling author Jackie Hill Perry, in her much anticipated follow-up to *Gay Girl, Good God*, helps us find the reason we don't trust God—we misunderstand His holiness.

In *Holier Than Thou*, Jackie walks us through Scripture, shaking the dust off of "holy" as we've come to know it and revealing it for what it really is: good news. In these pages, we will see that God is not like us. He is different. He is holy. And that's exactly what makes Him trustworthy. As it turns out, God being "holier than thou" is actually the best news in the world, and it's the key to trusting Him.

JACKIE HILL PERRY is an author, poet, Bible teacher, and artist. Since becoming a Christian, she has been compelled to use her speaking and teaching gifts to share the light of the gospel of God as authentically as she can. At home she is a wife to Preston and mommy to Eden, Autumn, and Sage.

BH

BHPUBLISHING.COM

RELIGION/Christian Living/Spiritual Growth
978-1-5359-7571-1 \$17.99 USD



9 781535 975711

51799