Holiness of God Sermon

So for those of you who have been here through the summer, as you know we have been doing a series looking at the attributes of God. We've looked at his love, faithfulness, power, wisdom, truth and this morning I get the privilege of speaking to you about his holiness! Now Martin and I debated this one because arguably, his holiness is not one of his attributes, but rather, in a sense, it's what shapes all his attributes! You could could say that this whole summer series is summed up with this - the holiness of God: His love is a holy love, His mercy is holy mercy, his wisdom is a holy wisdom, and even His anger is a holy anger. And so it's a tremendous privilege for me to speaking on God's holiness, and I hope it will be as much of a blessing for you to hear this morning as it has been for me to prepare! But before we dive in, I'd like to ask you a question: does God's holiness scare you or does it comfort you? I want you to think about that for a minute…

I guess the answer to that largely depends on what you understand the holiness of God to be! Perhaps the world holy confuses you, perhaps it seems overwhelming, perhaps it seems like a concept you'll never grasp! You sing these songs about God's holiness but aren't really sure what it's all about! I think for me, for a long time the holiness of God confused me, because I'm told that God is holy, but then I'm told to be holy myself, and it all just seems weird! But you know, the more I have studied the Bible and the more I have got to know God, the more I have found his holiness to be the most comforting thing in the world! There's simply nothing greater in this universe than God's holiness and I'm very excited to talk to you about it this morning. So, I have 3 points for you. I'd like to begin by discussing what God's holiness is, then I'd like us to see why, for the child of God, this is the most comforting thing in the world, and finally, I want us think about what it means for us to be holy. But first, I'd like to pray, will you join me…

So first,

What is God's holiness?

God's holiness has sometimes being referred to as his 'other-ness'. What does that mean? It means God is not like us. He is completely distinct, separate, unique. For example, we're created. He's not. We're human. He's not! We sin, we mess up. He doesn't. He never has! He's never made a mistake! He knows everything, we hardly know anything! We can be in one place at once! He can be everywhere all at once, he can do anything he wants whenever he wants - He is simply not like us! But hang on Mark, doesn't the Bible also tell us that we are made in God's image? Yes! Allow me to go on a slight detour for a moment, because I think this is really important! You see, on the last day of creation, God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness" (Genesis 1:26). So we are made with a "personal touch" if you like! This is what makes us distinct from the rest of his creation: we have both a material body and an immaterial soul or spirit. Animals don't have an immaterial soul, trees don't, fish don't! So being made in God's image means we were made to resemble God in that sense of having an eternal soul! But God doesn't have a body: Scripture says that "God is spirit" (John 4:24), so he exists without a body. Being made in the image of God means we're rational, means we can reason and choose. This is a reflection of God's intellect and freedom. Part of being made in God's image is that like Adam, we are created with the capacity to make free choices, and we know that Adam made an evil choice to rebel against his Creator. And as a result, he marred, he tainted the image of God within himself, and he passed that damage on to us (Romans 5:12). So, we still bear the image of God, but we also bear the scars of sin.

The good news is that when God redeems an individual, He begins to restore the original image of God, creating a "new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:24). That redemption is only available by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior from the sin that separates us from God. Through Christ, we are made new creations in the likeness of God (2 Corinthians 5:17).

And so that's what it means that we are made in God's image, but remember we are like God, to a certain degree, but he is not like us. He doesn't want us to pull him down to our level. He is the God of the Bible, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Listen to what God says about himself:

Hosea 11:9: ‘I am God and not a mere mortal’ - In other words, ‘I’m not like you!’
Isaiah 40:25: "To whom will you compare me? Who is my equal?" asks the Holy One.
Isaiah 55:8: "My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts," says the Lord. "And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine.
Isaiah 57:15: ‘I dwell in a high and holy place’

You get the picture? God’s different. He’s separate, he’s other! And he wants us to know it! Let’s not try bring God down to our level. We are made in God’s image, but we’re not supposed to make him into ours! He is so far above us, so way beyond us, so much greater than we are and so much greater than anything we know! We can know a lot about him, as he reveals himself, but we’ll never have him all figured out! He is holy!

So what about this word holy? What does it even mean? It basically means ‘…to be distinct, separate, in a class by itself’. The Bible says “There is no one holy like the Lord, Indeed, there is no one besides you, there is no rock like our God.” In both the OT and NT we read that the angels bow low before God and cry out ‘holy, holy, holy’. This is actually quite and interesting phrase. One theologian (R. C. Sproul), makes a good point about this. He says that we should pay special attention to this phrase ‘holy, holy, holy’ because repetition in the Bible is important! The Bible never says that God is love, love, love, or mercy, mercy, mercy, or wrath, wrath, wrath, but it does say that He is holy, holy, holy. Clearly, the Holy Spirit wants us to get this, and so, when the angels around the throne cry out, “Holy, holy, holy,” they are expressing with force and passion the truth of the supreme holiness of God. He is distinct, there is no one like him, nothing to compare him to, he has always been there, he will always be there! This is what we mean when we say God is holy!

So where does this leave you and I? Well the first place it should lead us is to worship. Like Moses, when we realise who God is, we ought to take off our shoes, and bow low. Like Isaiah, when we get a revelation of who he is, we

should forget all about ourselves, and cry out ‘wow! God is great, I am unworthy, I’m a sinner!’ That’s an appropriate response to the holiness of God: to be completely overwhelmed by his greatness, to fall to our knees or on our faces and to cry out with angels ‘holy holy holy’. But this holy God doesn’t remain aloof from his creation! Yes, he’s majestic, he is all-knowing, he is everywhere, he is all powerful, but he’s a personal God, he’s a God who’s revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ. He loves us and he wants a relationship with us - that’s why he created us in the first place! We may not fully comprehend him, but what we do know is amazing! It’s not meant to frighten us, if you are his child, it should comfort you endlessly…

My second point this morning, **The comfort of his holiness**

You see, it’s God’s holiness that stands at the centre of everything he does, and I find that incredibly comforting. Why? Think about it: when I’m filled with fear, His holiness comforts me. 1 John 4:18: ‘There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.’ We’re loved by his holy love: his holy, unconditional, no-strings-attached love, and so what have we to fear? Death? Even that can’t separate us from his holy love!

When I doubt, when I’m stressed, His holiness comforts me. As Martin preached last week, God can’t lie! God is truth. Everything he says, he does, and think about what he says… He says that he knows the plans he has for you, and that those plans are good and not for disaster, plans to give you a future and a hope. He promises strength to the weak, he promises to supply all your needs from his glorious riches, he promises that nothing can ever separate us from him, He promises peace in uncertain situations, he promises us salvation in Jesus Christ. We could go on and on, it’s estimated that there’s over 3500 specific promises of God to his people found in the Bible and all those promises he has made are absolutely certain. Why? Because he is Holy!

Even when I sin, as a believer in Jesus, He comforts me. Even then I don’t have to fear! His holiness doesn’t make me afraid. There is mercy and grace promised to me in Jesus Christ. When I sin, I have an advocate with the

Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for my sins, 1st John says, and not for mine only, but for the whole world. So, when I sin, I come to him, I trust Him. My sin is dealt with. I'm his child, and he's my holy Father. You see, we can rest on his holiness: when we are weak, he is strong. Where we lack he is sufficient. He is everything we're not. So cast yourself on his unchanging character; on his holiness: cry out 'holy, holy, holy'! 'Worship the Lord in the splendour of his holiness'. Praise God for his holiness. Thank Him for his love, his mercy, his grace, his faithfulness towards us! His holiness is such a comfort for the believer.

And, while I'd sort of like to finish there and just praise him now, there is one more thing that I'd like to mention, and that is how we also become holy! Sorry Mark? How can we be holy? Only God is holy! That's what we just read isn't it? That's what you've been telling us! True God is holy and get this: he wants you to be too! Holiness is not only a possibility for the Christian; holiness is a requirement.

That's my final point for us to consider today: **the command to be holy**

In both the old and new testaments of the bible we read God saying this to his people: "Be holy, because I am holy." The first time we see that is when God is speaking to the Israelites in Leviticus and the second time is when Peter is writing to Christians. He writes, 'just as he who called you is holy, so you also be holy in all you do; for it is written, "Be holy, because I am holy." So what do we do with that?

Well, I'd like to finish by discussing 4 ways we can put this verse into practice and grow in holiness. But remember, there is a difference between God's holiness and ours in that He is inherently holy: everything he does is holy, it's his character! While we, on the other hand, only become holy in relationship to Jesus Christ, and so we grow in holiness, God doesn't. We are becoming more holy as we become more like Jesus. This is a work that the Holy Spirit is doing in Christians, and we're all in different places. It's also called sanctification. We are saved by the blood of Jesus, we have eternal life through what he accomplished on the cross. That's finished. If you put your

trust in Jesus you are made righteous, right with God, through his blood. You are declared righteous by God once and for all. But holiness is different, that is a lifelong process. God wants his people to be holy, he wants us to be set apart for his use, he wants clean vessels to use! God expects us to cultivate a lifestyle of holiness with the help of his Holy Spirit. I'm not talking about a list of 'do's' and 'don'ts', that's legalism, and it never works, but there's an interesting verse in Philippians where Paul says, as Christians, we need to "Work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13). So you see there's cooperation between God and us in sanctification. We "work out" what God "works in" us.

So I'd like us to read Psalm 24:3-5, and pull out of it 4 characteristics of holy people. The Psalms says this, "Who may ascend to the hill of the Lord and who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart who does not lift up his soul unto an idol nor swear by what is false. He will receive the blessing from the Lord.

So, the first step towards holiness is…

1. **They have clean hands.** What does that mean? 'Clean hands' simply means a clear conscience. Do you need to forgive someone this morning? Are you harbouring bitterness because of something that someone did to you? If you are, you need to work it out with God first and then possibly with them. The Bible tells us that unforgiveness gives a foothold to the devil. And so we need to keep short accounts with others and with God. We need to be honest with God. We need to confess our weaknesses to him, he sees it all anyway. Does that mean we're perfect? No. None of us will ever be perfect. But we can keep short accounts with God. 1 John 1:9 says, "But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful to forgive us and cleanse us from all our sin.' So when we sin, we just say, "God, I was wrong. I confess it." We must have a clear conscience.

2. The second thing that the Psalm says is that holy people have a **'pure heart'**. We need to have pure motives. We often think we can deceive

people, and sometimes we might be able to, but we can't deceive God! 1 Thessalonians 2:4 says that 'God examines the motives of our hearts'. Listen, in our private moments, we need to be saying, "God, examine my heart, show me my motives, why do I really want to do that? What's the real motive behind that email? Why do I really want to say that to them"! Let's not be people who have mixed motives, talk to God about them and let him show you, then you will have a pure heart.

3. The third thing is that we must have a '**surrendered heart'**. The Psalm says that a holy person 'does not lift up his soul unto an idol'. In other words, we put nothing before God. We have to ask ourselves what our idols are? What are the things that are getting in the way of our relationship with God. Could be career, could be family, could be our need for attention, could be earning money, could be sport, could be so many things. We need to surrender these things to God and put him first.

4. And finally, but by no means is this an exhaustive list, we must be **honest.** Now Martin preached on this last week, in his sermon about God's truth and I strongly recommend that if you missed it, to go online and watch it, but the psalm says that a holy person doesn't "swear by what is false". To be holy, we've got to be honest. We've got to watch what we say! Our words can get us in a lot of trouble can't they? The Bible has a lot to say about what we say! The Proverbs often warn us to watch our tongues! 'In the multitude of words there's sin'. Perhaps we could start by asking "God, where do I need to watch my words? At home, at the office, with that person? Are you prone to sarcasm, or exaggeration or just simply putting others down with your words? If so, pray and ask God to help you control your tongue!

So you see God uses holy people. He wants to use you for his kingdom's sake, but if you are going to be used you have to be set apart: a clear conscience, pure motives, putting nothing before him, and using wisdom with what you say. I know these things are not natural for us. But God is holy and he calls us to be holy, and so he equips us, he empowers us by his Holy Spirit. It's him that makes us holy. What a privilege to grow in holiness!

And so, God is holy! He's other! This shouldn't scare us, not if you are his child. It's the most comforting thing in the world: it's his holiness that makes him who he is: loving, gracious, full of mercy and truth! And yet, he calls us to be holy, he calls us to be his holy people, set apart for his use and he promises to work in us as we work out what it is he is putting in us! Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty! Let's close by singing that famous hymn!