



*The Call to*  
**HOLINESS**

*Pursuing the Heart of God for the Love of the World*

TIMOTHY C. TENNENT

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## ONE



### *Holiness and the Attributes of God*

#### *Introduction*

This little book is a series of reflections on the doctrine of holiness. Holiness is central to the Christian understanding of the gospel because the gospel does not begin with us or with our response to God. It begins with God Himself, who has revealed Himself as a holy God. One of the most repeated phrases in the Old Testament describing the nature of God is His statement, “I am holy.” The same declaration is found in the New Testament: “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’” (1 Peter 1:15–16). We are called to be holy because He is holy. To be in relationship with God is to be brought into the household of holiness. The word *holiness* comes from

a Hebrew word, *kadash*, which means “to separate” or “to set apart” or “to distinguish.” It is, therefore, a word about God’s position in relation to us and to a world that occupies the household of sin. However, before we can even begin to explore the biblical doctrine of holiness, we must first understand the nature of all of God’s attributes, and how our contemporary perspective on holiness has become distorted.

### *The Nature of God*

If you were asked to write down a list of the attributes of God, what would that list look like? If you are like most people, you would write down such adjectives as *almighty*, *powerful*, *loving*, *full of grace*, *merciful*, *all-knowing*, *righteous*, *sovereign*, and titles such as *Creator*, *Judge*, *Lord*, *King*, *Heavenly Father*, and so forth. If you had time to really think about it, you might include attributes such as *omnipresent* (present everywhere), *eternal*, *infinite*, and so forth. You might also include the word *holy* on the list. If we spent enough time and thought on the list, I am sure that it could get very long, indeed. We might eventually begin to include things like *self-existent*, *uncreated*, *immutable* (unchangeable), and *immanent* (present with us right now).

Even if we have never taken time to sit down and make such a list, we all have some sort of list in our minds, don’t we? We have a certain inner sense about what God must be like and certain actions that we are quite sure God should do or, perhaps, would never do.

I want to devote this first meditation to the two main problems we have in thinking about such a list, whether we have written it down or not. Then, I want to propose an alternative approach that avoids the two problems. Let us examine these two problems briefly.

### *Our Experience with Attributes*

First, whatever attributes we have ascribed to God, we should realize that we have only experienced these attributes in fragmentary and imperfect ways. In other words, we have only a vague human idea of what mercy or love or holiness is, but we have never really experienced any of these attributes in their perfect form. For example, if someone says, “God is our heavenly Father,” we might naturally think about our own fathers, and this might make some wonder if this really is a good description, especially if our fathers were aloof or uncaring. If we have only known corruption in human judges, then it can really influence how we might think about God as Judge. Other attributes, like omnipresence or self-existence, can become almost like theoretical ideas since we have never experienced anyone who is present everywhere, or who is not created. So, right at the threshold we are already in difficulty if we think about God’s attributes only in terms of our own experience of them. What we can only know partially or, perhaps, only theoretically, God embodies in full perfection.

### *Putting God's Attributes in a Hierarchy*

The second problem we have in thinking about God's attributes is that we tend to place them in a kind of hierarchy. In other words, we tend to see some attributes as trumping others. We think some attributes are better than others. It is not unusual, for example, to hear someone say that the God of the Old Testament is a God of judgment, whereas the God of the New Testament is a God of mercy. Statements like this are often used to imply that grace is a more important attribute or a more God-like attribute than judgment. In the Old Testament God says, "I am holy" whereas in the New Testament, the apostle John says, "God is love." Therefore, we reason, God's love must be greater than God's holiness. We end up actually pitting some of God's attributes against others and leveraging one against the other. However, the idea of ranking God's attributes, or leveraging God's love against His holiness, gets us into a lot of difficulties. We need to lay that approach aside and think about this in a different way. We cannot recover a proper understanding of holiness unless we come to see it within the proper setting of *all* of God's attributes.

### *A Different Way of Thinking about God's Attributes*

If we go back to our list of God's attributes, it is obvious that some of them are clearly only reflected in us in tiny, fragmentary ways. Take, for example, God's eternity. We

really don't know what that means from a human experience. We might think of someone who has lived a really long life, perhaps one hundred years or more. We might think about a majestic mountain that has towered over human civilization for thousands of years, but we realize that we really have no proper human reference point for thinking about eternity. We actually should have this perspective on all attributes of God. There is simply no human starting point to really grasp the full idea of any of God's attributes, even attributes like mercy, grace, or forgiveness. This is also true of the word *holiness*.

A good way to begin thinking about God's attributes properly is to temporarily suspend all our ideas about the fragmentary ways we perceive God's attributes. In their place, we must begin by making several adjustments.

First, we must recognize that all of God's attributes are always found in their full perfection. In other words, God embodies mercy perfectly. God is the perfect Judge. God is the perfect Creator. God embodies love with perfection. He alone embodies every attribute in its full perfection, and there is no attribute that finds full perfection in the human experience. (We will come back to this idea later when we look how John Wesley described holiness as being made "perfect in love.")

Second, we must cease looking at some attributes of God in isolation from His other attributes. Our natural,

default way of looking at God and His attributes is to envision a great flower with many petals. God is at the center, and His petals are His attributes. We might think of grace as one petal, love as another, holiness as another, righteousness as yet another, and so forth. We must delete this image from our thinking. God's attributes are all *united* in His person, and each is informed fully and completely by His other attributes. In other words, God's love is a holy love. God's righteous judgment is fully and completely informed by His mercy. God's transcendence (His otherness) is fully informed by His immanence (His closeness). Each attribute is fully informed and shaped by the others because, in the end, God has no attributes that are separate extensions of Himself the way a flower has separate petals. Rather, God is a unified, integrated whole who, in His own nature and person, fully embodies all the attributes simultaneously in their full perfection.

With these two simple adjustments, we will make enormous progress in how we talk about God. For example, it is not unusual to hear conversations where the love of God is discussed as if it were some kind of vague emotion that describes God's feelings toward us, or where it is used as leverage against other attributes of God, particularly His holiness or His actions as righteous Judge. However, the Scriptures present God's love as a covenantal commitment to defend righteousness and to defeat and silence

all rebellion. It is impossible, for example, for God to love the poor without also acting in judgment against those who oppress them. God's love and His judgment both are extended in their full perfection, and both emerge from God's own integrated being, wherein all attributes exist simultaneously. God is not merciful to the oppressed by invoking an emotive feeling about the oppressed, but rather, by overthrowing the oppressor and setting things right. The mercy and judgment of God are unified in God's nature, and both are in full perfection in the character of God. It is only when we separate attributes from one another and impose hierarchies of attributes that we fall into various errors.

A whole range of faulty thinking rampant in the church today would be swept away if even this most basic understanding of God's attributes would be understood. For example, how many times have you heard someone say in response to a comment about God's judgment or His opposition to sin, "Well, *my* God is a God of love." This represents a misunderstanding of God's attributes and not only demonstrates an isolation of one attribute from another, but puts an unwarranted wedge between one of God's attributes, holiness, and another, His love. This same problem is found when someone pits the Old Testament against the New Testament, as if two different Gods are revealed in the two testaments. This type of person demonstrates a profound misunderstanding of God's love and grace in the

Old Testament, as well as God's judgment and holiness in the New Testament. The incarnation of Jesus Christ and His death on the cross should not be seen as the trumping of God's holiness with His love, but the fullest, most perfect manifestation of both.

### *Conclusion*

These meditations will seek to explore how God's holiness is manifested within the larger framework of His self-revelation as found in the Bible and in our lives. I hope to show that holiness is not simply a doctrine we believe in, but that it is fundamental to our relationship with God and the world. Holiness is tied to the very nature of the missional heart of God. We will see that holiness—along with all of God's other amazing attributes—always informs who He is in all of His dealings with us. In fact, a study of any of the attributes of God leads naturally to the whole character and nature of God since they are all found in an integrated whole in His person. It is my prayer that these reflections on holiness will lead us to a deeper relationship with God and one another, and will affect how we live in the world.