



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 2.6.6 – The Doctrine of God

The Attributes of God: Holiness and Righteousness

God is holy. This means that He is absolutely pure and sinless. He loves good and hates evil. He is not like us. He is far above us. We are not worthy to stand in His presence. After God led them across the Red Sea on dry ground, Moses and the children of Israel sang this song of praise: **“Who is like You, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like You, glorious in holiness?”** (Exodus 15:11). The psalmist instructs us: **“Exalt the LORD our God, and worship at His holy hill; for the LORD our God is holy”** (Psalm 99:9).

The prophet Isaiah saw a vision of the **“holy, holy, holy ... LORD of hosts”**. His reaction was: **“Woe is me, for I am undone! Because 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”** (Isaiah 6:3-5). In Revelation 15:3-4 the people praise God in these words: **“Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy.”**

Since God Himself is holy, He requires that we, who were originally made in His image, also be holy. When the Lord delivered the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt, He said to them: **“I am the LORD who brings you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy”** (Leviticus 11:44). This is still the standard for the new Israel, that is, all believers in Jesus, for the apostle Paul wrote: **“He (God) chose us in Him (Christ) before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love”** (Ephesians 1:4). The apostle Peter likewise wrote: **“As He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am holy’”** (1 Peter 1:15-16).

God’s moral law determines what is holy and what is not holy. The moral law is summarized in the Ten Commandments as they are explained in the New Testament. What God commands is good. What God forbids is evil. Everything that the Bible neither commands or forbids is called *adiaphora*. *Adiaphora* can be good or bad, depending on the circumstances.

God’s Word must determine for us what holiness is, and there is no higher judge. **“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness”** (2 Timothy 3:16). The scribes and Pharisees promoted their own laws above God’s law. Jesus said this about them: **“In vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men”** (Matthew 15:9).

Because God is holy, evil cannot stand in His presence. David says to God: **“You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness, nor shall evil dwell with You. The boastful shall not stand in Your sight; You hate all workers of iniquity. You shall destroy those who speak falsehood; the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man”** (Psalm 5:4-6). The prophet Ezekiel warned his people that a day of judgment is coming: **“Then the nations shall know that I am the LORD, the Holy One in Israel...I will not let them profane My holy name anymore”** (Ezekiel 39:7-8).

If all human beings are sinners, and no sinner can dwell in God’s sight, then how can anyone pass God’s examination on Judgment Day? The answer to that question is the cross of Christ. In the cross of Christ God’s holiness is on full display. On the cross the holy God punished His Holy Son because He was bearing the sin of the world.

In the Old Testament, God commanded many bloody animal sacrifices to pay for sin. These many sacrifices prefigured Jesus' atoning sacrifice on the cross. If the Israelites had been able to keep God's holy commandments, no sacrifices would have been necessary. Moses told the people: **"The LORD will establish you as a holy people to Himself, just as He has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the LORD your God and walk in His ways"** (Deuteronomy 28:9). But even the prophet Isaiah had to confess that He was sinful when he was given a vision of the holy God: **"Woe is me, for I am undone!"** God then presented the solution to his sin problem. Isaiah said: **"Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said: 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged'"** (Isaiah 6:5-7). The altar shows that the solution to the problem of sin is a sacrifice on an altar, namely, the sacrifice of the holy Son of God on the altar of the cross.

Sinful man had no solution to the problem of sin. God Himself had to provide the fitting sacrifice. **"Oh, sing to the LORD a new song! For He has done marvelous things; His right hand and His holy arm have gained Him the victory"** (Psalm 98:1). **"Christ...has...given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma"** (Ephesians 5:2). **"Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place (heaven) once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"** (Hebrews 9:12-14).

The term "righteousness" in the Bible can be used in two ways. In one way it refers to the perfect holiness of God, which demands that we be as holy as He is; otherwise, He will punish us. This is the righteousness of the Law. Psalm 7:11: **"God is a just judge, and God is angry with the wicked every day."**

On the other hand, the Bible very often speaks of the righteousness of God as His gift to us. It is a gift won for all sinners by the perfect life and perfect death of Jesus Christ, God's holy Son. In this sense, righteousness is our salvation. The cross shows God's punishing righteousness at work as He punishes His Son in His righteousness, because His Son, Jesus, was bearing the sin of the world. God cursed and punished and even forsook His Son as though this Son were guilty of all the sin that has ever been committed by the entire human race. In fact, because God counted the sin of the world against Jesus, Jesus was really guilty of all at that moment and had to be punished. But since Jesus was indeed punished for the sin of the world, God pronounced the whole world righteous in Him. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament proclaim this righteousness of God by which we are saved.

The first half of Psalm 22 presents in advance the scene of the cross: God punishing His Son for all human sin. But the second half of Psalm 22 concludes with these words: **"They will come and declare His righteousness to a people who will be born, that He has done this"** (Psalm 22:31). Very often the prophet Isaiah refers to God's righteousness and salvation in the same sentence. For example, he says in Chapter 51:5-6: **"My righteousness is near, My salvation has gone forth, and My arms will judge the peoples; the coastlands will wait upon Me, and on My arm they will trust...My salvation will be forever, and My righteousness will not be abolished."** In the same way, the prophet Jeremiah spoke of the Messiah as our salvation and also our righteousness: **"Behold, the days are coming," says the LORD, "that I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; a King shall reign and prosper, and execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell safely; now this is His name by which He will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS"** (Jeremiah 23:5-6).

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul explains the righteousness of God very clearly. It is the theme of the letter: **"For I am not ashamed of the gospel (good news) of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the**

righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘The just shall live by faith’” (Romans 1:16-17). In the Gospel the righteousness of God is revealed, not His righteousness which condemns our sin, but His righteousness which He freely gives to us because Jesus was already punished for all human sin. This is the good news. All human sin went to Jesus, and He was punished for that sin. In its place Jesus gives us His perfect righteousness – the perfect righteousness of God. Through Jesus we have the total forgiveness of all our sins and we are holy before God; therefore, we have salvation and eternal life.

Paul explained in the letter: **“But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe”** (Romans 3:21-22) The righteousness of God is God’s gift to us, which we receive by faith. It is God’s promise of His righteousness which becomes our righteousness simply by our trusting in it.

Questions

1. What does it mean that God is holy?
2. How did the prophet Isaiah feel when he was in the presence of the holy God?
3. What is God’s standard of life and behavior for human beings?
4. How do we know what behavior God considers holy?
5. What must all of us confess in the presence of the holy God?
6. What is the only way in which we human beings can be counted as holy by God?
7. What was the main purpose of all the animal sacrifices in the Old Testament?
8. In what two ways is the word “righteousness” used in the Bible?
9. Why does the prophet Jeremiah call the coming Messiah our righteousness?
10. How does the cross of Jesus display God’s holiness and His righteous anger?
11. What did Jesus win for the whole world by His suffering on the cross?
12. How does Christ’s righteousness become our righteousness?