



What Does It Mean To Be Holy?

DISCOVERING GOD'S WORD BIBLE STUDY SERIES

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What does it mean to be “holy”? Holiness is presented in the Scriptures as being a characteristic of God and one that is required of mankind in order to be pleasing to God. But, “holy” is not a word that we commonly use. Generally, we think of “holy” as being something that is pure. But, let’s evaluate the Scriptures to gain a greater understanding and appreciation of what it means to be “holy.”

General Passages About Holiness

As you read the Scriptures, you should be impressed just how many times the word “holy” (or some variation of it) is used. But, it is not always used in the context of *someone* being holy. Instead, it can also be used in a generic sense that helps us to appreciate the word’s true meaning. As you will see upon investigating these passages, the word “holy” carries the general idea of something/someone “set apart.” Consider the following examples.

(1) Exodus 3:5. “Then He said, ‘Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.’”

As Moses turned aside to look at a bush that was burning, but, not being consumed by the fire, God called to Moses. He instructed Moses to take his shoes off – because the place he was standing was “holy ground.” This ground was “holy” because it was separated from/different than all of the common ground. This ground was holy in that it was in the presence of the Almighty God!

(2) Exodus 20:8-11. “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work....”

The Sabbath (seventh) day was to be kept holy under the Old Covenant. This day was set apart from all of the other days of the week. The Israelites were to recognize this day as being separate – and follow God’s special instructions concerning their work on the Sabbath.

(3) Romans 16:16. “Greet one another with a holy kiss. The churches of Christ greet you.”

This passage (along with 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12; and 1 Thessalonians 5:26) talks about the greeting between those who are Christians. This greeting is something that ought to be special and set apart from all the other ways people greet each other. There is something truly special/unique about the way Christians should greet one another. It reflects the unique and special relationship that is shared between one another in the Lord.

(4) 2 Timothy 1:9. “[Who] has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began.”

The way that God calls people to Himself is separate from all of the other calls an individual might receive in this world. God calls people to Himself through the gospel’s message (2 Thessalonians 2:14). Therefore, this call is special and unique in that it is the only calling that will result in the salvation of souls (Romans 1:16)!

Spiritual Application Of Holiness

As you can see, to be “holy” is to be set apart. Now, this is significant because the Scriptures use the word many times to describe God and give this responsibility to those who desire to be God’s people. When it is used in this way, the word refers to being set apart from everything that is evil.

(1) God is holy. First, consider the fact that the Scriptures declare God as being “holy.” Exodus 15:11 asks, “Who is like You, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like You, glorious in holiness, Fearful in praises, doing wonders?”

This passage is part of Moses’ song of praise to God after the deliverance from Egypt. He recognized that there is none other equal to God in holiness! God’s holiness is perfect in that He is entirely separated from *everything* that is evil or sinful!

Revelations 4:8 says, “The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!’”

Here is the tremendous sight of four living creatures around the throne of God. These living creatures are vividly and magnificently described in Revelation 4:6-8. One is like a lion. One is like a calf. One has a face like a man. One is like a flying eagle. They are full of eyes in front and in back. They each have six wings. Then, you notice that these marvelous beings are praising God day and night by proclaiming, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!” There is even one set of Greek manuscripts that has the word “holy” repeated nine times! You would do well to compare this scene with the one in Isaiah 6:1-3. Therefore, not only is God’s holiness something that is to be imitated, but it is also something to be praised!

Certainly, God is “holy.” And, 1 John 1:5 helps us to understand exactly what it means for God to be “holy.” It says, “This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God

is light and in Him is no darkness at all.” God is so entirely holy that He is depicted as being as separated from evil as light is separated from darkness. Indeed, there is not even a shade of evil in God!

(2) The Israelites were expected to be holy. Throughout most of the Old Testament Scriptures, you read about the nation of Israel. This was the nation God had chosen to be His special people during the Old Testament period of time. And, as His special people, God required them to be “holy.” Consider a couple of references.

Leviticus 11:44-45 says, “For I am the Lord your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy. Neither shall you defile yourselves with any creeping thing that creeps on the earth. For 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 19:2, Leviticus 20:7, Leviticus 20:26, and Leviticus 21:7-8 also make the same claim about God. Six times in these passages the concept of “be holy, for I am holy” is either stated or implied. These passages indicated the responsibility of God’s people (the Israelites at that time) to be holy. They were to be separate from the wicked ways of the world and entirely devoted to Him because God is entirely set apart from that which is evil!

Deuteronomy 26:18-19 says, “Also today the Lord has proclaimed you to be His special people, just as He promised you, that you should keep all His commandments, and that He will set you high above all nations which He has made, in praise, in name, and in honor, and that you may be a holy people to the Lord your God, just as He has spoken.”

The covenant Israel entered with the Lord was this: They would be God’s people and He would bless them. And, He would be their God and they would keep His commandments. Therefore, the people of Israel were separated from all of the people of the world to serve the Lord according to the Lord’s instructions and abstain from the sinful ways of the world!

(3) God’s people today are expected to be holy. Now, this study of holiness comes to the most significant point of application for us. Up to this point, we have just been gaining a greater understanding of the word “holy,” and observing how God is holy and the Israelites were expected to be holy. Now, we need to observe that this responsibility to be “holy” has also been extended to those who desire to be God’s people today.

1 Peter 1:15-16 says, “but 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.’”

As we have seen, God is separated from all that is evil. In the same way, God expects His people to be separated from all that is evil in every area of their lives! And, this passage instructs that you must be holy according to God’s standard of holiness in order to please Him.

Let’s revisit 1 John 1 in order to observe the connection between the holiness of God and the fact that God requires individuals to be holy today. Recall that verse 5 taught that God is light and has no darkness in Him at all. He is entirely separated from everything that is evil/wicked. Then, verse 6

teaches that if we walk in the ways of darkness that are contrary to God's holiness, we have no fellowship with God.

Now, how is it possible for mankind to know what things are according to God's standard of holiness and what are not? 2 Timothy 3:16-17 states that all Scripture (as revealed in the pages of the Bible) has been given by inspiration of God (they are God-breathed). And, as such, the things we can read about in the pages of the Bible teach us everything we need to know in order to believe what God wants us to believe, make the changes God wants us to make, and do the things God wants us to do. In fact, the passage says that we can be made complete (perfect) and entirely equipped for every good work through the words God has revealed in the pages of the Bible!

Therefore, violating the law God has revealed in the pages of His word is "sin." And, sin separates us from the holy God (see Isaiah 59:1-2). The result of failing to live according to God's standard of holiness is spiritual death (separation from God, see Romans 6:23). And, if you die physically while being separated from God, you will be separated from Him for all of eternity (called the "second death," see Revelation 21:8).

But, thanks be to God that even though we had all sinned and fallen short of His glory (Romans 3:23), God sent His only begotten Son to give His life as the sacrifice to save mankind from the consequences of his sin and give him the opportunity to be holy once again (see Colossians 1:19-23). Now, through Jesus' sacrifice, we can be made holy in God's sight and be in fellowship with Him once more! And, if we will devote ourselves to perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord (2 Corinthians 7:1), we can live eternally with God in Heaven one day!

Conclusion

To be "holy" is to be "set apart." In the spiritual sense, this refers to being set apart from everything that is evil. And, since God is entirely separated from everything that is evil, He requires that you be separated from everything that is evil if you want to please Him!

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